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POOR VALERIA! OR, THE BROKEN TROTH.

BY MARGARET BLOUNT.

CHAPTER I.

"Twas on a Monday morning
Right early in the year,
That Charlie came to our town,
The young Chevalier.

"And Charlie, he's my darling,
My darling, my darling,
And Charlie, he's my darling,
The young Chevalier!"—OLD SONG.

It was ten o'clock on a bright summer morn-
ing, and London, at least the busy part of Lon-

don, was all astir. Business-men were hurrying on foot or by omnibus, from the country-trains to their respective offices. The shops were all open, and every one was rushing to and fro, intent upon their own errands, and wearing that compressed, money-making look, that is seen upon the face of every Londoner from seven in the morning till evening brings rest and thoughts of pleasure in its train.

As in the city, so in the suburbs. Knights-bridge and Brompton were crowded, though the international exhibition was even thought of then. Up and down the omnibuses went; up and down the foot-passengers jostled and crowded each other as the minutes fled by. The early service was over at Brompton Church; so also were the early masses at Brompton Oratory; and the two streams of worshippers, meeting at the gates, looked half-pityingly at each other for an instant, and went their several ways. It was a suggestive sight to any medita-

tive lounge with plenty of time to ponder over its meaning. Those two beautiful churches—the one gray and ivy-clad, hushed beneath the shadow of its avenues of blossoming limes, and its pleasant burial-ground—the other, more modern in its style, though representing an older and a different faith. There they stand, side by side, nothing but a slight stone wall to mark their outward separation; and yet in truth what a chasm yawns between them! And ever and anon, as the sweet bells cease to tinkle, and the fragrance of the incense dies upon the air, the great doors open, and the throng come forth to meet upon that narrow strip of pavement outside (common to all) to eye each other askance, wonderingly, yet pityingly, each thinking in his or her heart, perhaps, of the other: "How sad that so good a man or woman should have strayed so far from the right way—should know nothing of the peace and happiness I feel!" There they are, brothers and sisters by birth,



THE BROKEN TROTH.

citizens of one country, loyal to one throne, children of one Father, heirs of one eternal home, yet aliens and strangers forever here on earth—through religion and through faith.

On the morning of which I write, a young girl sat in her father's shop, watching the people as they passed on their way from church. She knew most of them by sight; for Catholics and Protestants alike dealt with her father, and she could testify to many an act of kindness performed by them without respect to creed or church. None knew better than she how, during the previous winter, many of the Protestant poor of the neighborhood had been supplied with food and clothing by the Fathers of the Oratory, and with her own eyes she had seen a Protestant lady of high rank kneeling by the sick-bed of a poor Irishwoman who died in the next house; had seen her go on foot for a priest, and support that peasant's head as tenderly upon her breast as if it had been a queen's. Knowing this, Valeria Grant watched that lady on her way home this morning, and mused:

"How is it? Why is it?"

Ah! Valeria, that question has puzzled many a wiser head and stronger heart than yours. It is a problem that can only be solved beyond the grave.

Feeling her inability to penetrate the mystery, Valeria dismissed it from her thoughts, and returned to the perusal of the paper in her hand. It was a penny weekly, and she was reading one of the exciting stories published therein—stories whose heroines invariably wear coronets, and whose heroes are nothing less than dukes. The tale pleased her, yet it made her discontented and unhappy at the same time. In that story, the Countess Dulcibella Millifieurs ate off gold and silver plate every day of her life, wore white silk dressing gowns in the morning, and white satin and pearls at night, had a house in Piccadilly, a mansion in Hertfordshire, a lodge in Inverness, a residence at Brighton, and a cottage in the Isle of Wight. Four pages and two maids waited especially on her ladyship. Her boudoir (described in three full columns) was a miracle of silk velvet, tapestry and gilding. She had an opera-box, a pony carriage, a miniature brougham, three satin-skinned, bright-eyed saddle-horses, a toy terrier that she could hide in the dainty pocket of her white silk morning jacket, and a Newfoundland about half as large as her town-house, and as faithful, beautiful and brave as Newfoundlands always are. The Lady Dulcibella's beauty matched this rare setting of luxury and wealth. Her brow was like alabaster, her cheeks like blush roses, her eyes were sapphires, her hair like threads of gold, her teeth were pearls, her lips were rubies, her hands were lilies, and her breast was like moonlit snow. In short, she was one of those floral and mineralogical wonders only found in novels of the Laura Matilda style—one of that extinct (I had almost said fossil) order of damsels, who never eat, drink, or sleep like other mortals, who can perform that most amazing feat of treading on a daisy without crushing it, and whose express mission on earth is to bewilder unfortunate human beings with their marvelous beauty, set every one by the ears, eclipse all other women, capsize the world, and play the mischief generally. Being only a plain woman myself, and feeling sufficiently already my own shortcomings, I for one feel most devoutly thankful that the Lady Dulcibellas have the kindness to stay in these story-books, where they belong; else, what would become of all the rest of us, my sisters?

Valeria Grant did not look upon the matter as philosophically as I do. She had that beautiful gift—faith in the author's story—which is the greatest compliment any author can possibly receive. To her simple heart, the Lady Dulcibella was a positive reality, white silk, morning-dresses, and all. And she dropped the paper from her hands and sighed discontentedly as she glanced around the shop. What had she—what was she beside all this beauty and

grace, only a stone's throw from her home, only a little way down Piccadilly?

The place where she sat, though light and airy, was but a greengrocer's shop. The vegetables and fruit in the great window were so beautifully arranged each morning by her own tasteful hands, that the good people of Brompton were accustomed to point it out to their stranger-visitors with pride, as if it had been a peculiar institution of their own suburb. But, alas! all her care, and skill, and taste could make nothing more of the contents of that window, than vulgar carrots, radishes, potatoes, celery, and fruit. No touch of imagination could possibly transform them, even for a moment, into the costly ornaments of the Lady Dulcibella's boudoir. And the floor, though very clean, was uncarpeted, and the shelves and counter, though painted like marble, were of deal, and the chair on which she sat was rush-bottomed—by no means a throne. Her dress, too! It was a dark-blue gingham, with linen cuffs and collar to match, tied with a coquettish little knot of ribbon, very neat and tasty, it is true, but not to be named in the same day with white silk dressing-gowns. While as to beauty—her heart failed her. She had always considered herself very good-looking, very pretty, it may be, for her glass told her a flattering tale, but the Lady Dulcibella's loveliness was something so superhuman that poor Valeria began to consider herself quite a fright. As she sat there with her cheeks leaning on her hand, and her eye looking pensively down, she certainly did not resemble one. She was tall, slender, and peculiarly elegant and graceful in her movements; her head was beautifully set upon a swanlike throat, her hair was abundant, wavy, glossy, and black as the raven's wing. She was fair as a lily, without a tint of color, save in the small, full mouth; her eyebrows and eyelashes, of the same jetty hue as her hair, gave a peculiar intensity to eyes of the deepest and darkest blue; her features were regular—had she been a peer's daughter, they would have been called "aristocratic"; and the peculiar smallness of her hands and feet would have been taken as additional proofs of her "gentle blood". But she was only a greengrocer's child, and so her grace, her delicacy, her slight reserve of manner, gifts that would have been her right in higher circles, only procured her in her own, the reputation of "a haughty, stuck-up thing, who doesn't know which side her bread is buttered on". So differently do the eyes of different people see.

You will perceive that, in reality, Miss Valeria need not, at least, have troubled her head about the Lady Dulcibella's beauty. In fact, she was a remarkably pretty girl; and, if her glass had not assured her of the fact, there were plenty of eyes to tell her so, in and out of Brompton. The young men of the neighborhood, thriving bakers, rising butchers, and aspiring shopkeepers, generally found ways and means of being civil to "old Grant"; some of the clerks from Harvey & Nichols' mammoth warehouse, and the students from Markham College, and the soldiers from Knightsbridge and Kensington barracks found it convenient to purchase their fruit at Grant's, and from Grant's pretty daughter. To each and all she was attentive and polite, but nothing more. They might gaze at her ardently, they might pay her respectful compliments, but not one among them all could boast of the slightest return, not one could say, with truth, that he had been favored with more than that sweet, calm smile, that graceful bend of the head, that low voiced "Thank you", which every customer received. She liked admiration—what young and pretty girl does not?—but she never made the slightest exertion to obtain or retain it; and those who would have wooed, even if they could not have won her, were tacitly repulsed by the quiet dignity of her manner. They called her cold and proud—"the beautiful iceberg"—among themselves, and the epithet was well applied; but icebergs sometimes melt!

But you will ask me if she was so beautiful, and if all these people told her so, why did she

torment herself about the Lady Dulcibella? Did she think herself a fright?

My dear reader, if you are a woman, and look honestly into your own heart, you will guess before I can tell you. But if you happen to belong to the more obtuse sex, I will have compassion on your ignorance and explain.

There comes a time in every woman's life, when she sees herself as she really is. Youthful vanity, youthful spirits blind us in our earlier years, and there is a glamour over ourselves as well as over everything else; but when all other illusions fade away, this one fades with them. Then the ugly woman sees the irregular features, the dull eyes, the scanty hair, and the indifferent complexion she failed to notice before—the beauty spies the coming wrinkles, the faded air, the faded bloom, the symptoms of decay, which, till now, she would not acknowledge—the clever woman acknowledges in her own heart, what a "Bristol diamond" that cleverness really is, and how artfully though unconsciously she has taken in, not only all who knew her, but also her own self; the dull woman begins to be dimly conscious that she has never yet set the Thames on fire, and now will never accomplish that feat, and so on to the end of the chapter. I say, this time comes to all women, because I feel sure that it must do so. It is not possible for us to go on fancying ourselves beautiful, wise, good, and amiable, till death comes to show us our dreadful mistake. Vanity is one of the strongest and longest lived of passions, yet when the broad light of noon-day shines, one can but choose to see.

But this light shines only after a certain time. One must have tried all earth's toys, and found them crumbling and breaking in their grasp, before they see what toys they are. A woman, who has lived a busy changing life, necessarily learns this lesson long before others, who have been sheltered in the sacred silence of home, but I should say that no woman, gifted with an ordinary amount of common sense, ever lived to be thirty, without being so far enlightened if she would but be honest enough to acknowledge it.

Before this grand natural awakening comes another. 'Tis when the girl or woman first falls in love. Then all about herself looks poor and unsatisfactory—all about her lover grand and noble. He stands in the golden sunlight of Claude Lorraine. She lingers outside, in the cold and the dark, with nothing on earth to offer him in return for the priceless treasure of his affection! Ineffable nonsense, it is true! And it makes one laugh to recall such folly, such insanity, and yet—ah, me!—it was sweet to be a fool! very sweet to be insane! No woman worthy the name, ever yet loved for the first time, and felt herself worthy of her lover. Rely upon it, Venus, when her heart was first touched, believed herself as awkward as a country clown, fancied that her hair was red, not golden, and her nose a perfect snub.

Murder will out, you perceive, and Miss Pussey has put her head out of the bag in the very first chapter of my tale. Valeria's personal envy of the Lady Dulcibella arose from a purely personal cause. Hyde Park was one of the young lady's favorite resorts when she could get a holiday from the shop; and there, in company with her sister Maria, she would spend hours gazing at the occupants of the splendid carriages, and at the riders in Rotten Row.

Valeria had no conception of the life of unutterable weariness most of those people led. You could not have made her believe that those duchesses, countesses, and baronesses, lying back in their coroneted carriages, were devoured with envy, spite, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. She could not have understood that one was broken-hearted because her husband's favorite sultana had just passed her with an impertinent smile in a carriage far handsomer than her own; that another had pawned her diamonds for money to pay her gambling debts; that a third hid a guilty secret in her breast, and dreaded shame, exposure, and dishonor, day by day; that a fourth was dying with envy because her neighbor's opera-box and house eclipsed hers every season, and so on through the long catalogue of

titled names. No; Valeria believed that every one was happy there. Rotten Row was no equestrian slave-market in her eyes. The stylish young beauties were no husband-hunting damsels to her.

And there was one—oh, there was one among those riders whom she would have known among ten thousand anywhere! A young and stately gentleman, apparently no more than twenty-three years of age, with the fairest face and the most graceful form. Ah, how she watched for his bright bay horse, as it came cantering sideways down the Row! Beautiful as a dream he seemed to her, with his bright, fair complexion, his curling, golden hair, his blonde mustache, his large, sparkling, joyous, blue eyes, and his happy smile and graceful ways. She never asked his name, or knew his home. It was enough for her to watch him humbly from a distance, to think of him by day, to dream of him at night. Once, as he came leisurely by, his eyes rested for a moment approvingly upon her uplifted face. How she blushed at the recollection—how she sighed a moment after at the thought of the Lady Dulcibellas in the Park as well as in Picadilly! With those young, beautiful, highborn girls to choose from, was it likely that he would give a thought to a green-grocer's daughter?

A little tear fell as she asked herself the sensible question.

And this was why Valeria Grant believed herself to be awkward and ugly, and exalted the Lady Dulcibella on high at her own expense.

CHAPTER II.

"Sae licht he jumped up the stair,
And tirl'd at the pin,
And wha sae readie as hersel'
To let the laddie in?
And Charlie, he's my darling
My darling, my darling,
And Charlie, he's my darling,
The young Chevalier!"—OLD SONG.

A slight noise in the street disturbed Valeria's reverie. A prancing saddle-horse stopped before the door, and the rider, dismounting, summoned the groom to repair a stirrup-leather which had given way. With a slight exclamation of surprise, which she would have given worlds to recall the next moment, Valeria dropped her paper, and started from behind the counter. The gentleman looked up, gave one puzzled glance, then his face cleared, and lifting his hat, he bowed slightly to her. She shrank back into her place confused, agitated, and blushing, but, oh, so happy! It was the young stranger of the Park, and he had remembered and recognized her. Nay more—far more. He left his groom to repair the damage done, and entered the shop, bringing light and beauty with him—a young Apollo in her enraptured eyes. She glanced slyly at him, and looked down, half smiling, half afraid. How handsome he was! How elegantly he was dressed! And when he spoke, his musical voice sank into her very heart of hearts. She might live to be nine hundred and ninety-nine, yet never could she forget those sweet, low tones.

If the young stranger saw her embarrassment and understood its cause, he had the delicacy to appear entirely ignorant of it.

"It will take some little time to repair the stirrup," he said. "Will you allow me to wait here?"

"With pleasure, sir," she stammered, and pointed out a seat, with a hand that trembled visibly.

"No, thank you, I prefer standing. But, I am very thirsty. May I ask you to give me some of those delicious cherries in the window?"

Ruthlessly and deliberately Valeria despoiled the window of one of its principal ornaments, in the shape of a pyramidal basket of cherries—selected the finest, weighed out a pound, and placed them before him. Her father would have pulled her ears soundly, had he been there to see, for that window was the pride of his heart, and, once arranged for the day, was never to be disturbed till nightfall, though king and kaiser came to buy. But Valeria, for the

stranger's sake, would have pulled shop and all to pieces, at that moment. Indeed, one must have felt that she had a fair excuse, when they looked upon him. So gay, so graceful, so beautiful, so ready with his winning laugh and smile talking to her as respectfully as if she had been a duchess—his blue eyes only speaking the admiration his tongue dared not as yet express.

"Do you stay here all day?" he asked, at last, drawing on his delicate gloves after the cherries were finished. "Do you never get out to take the fresh air?"

"In the afternoon, sometimes," she replied. "My father is in the shop after twelve, and Maria and I go out then."

"Who is Maria?"

"My sister, sir."

"Ah! I saw you in Hyde Park several times this spring, I think. You used to stand by the rails watching the riders. Do you go there now?"

"Sometimes," she faltered, blushing crimson, for his eyes were upon her, smilingly saying, "You see I noticed you out of all the crowd," and she could scarcely speak.

"Hyde Park is a pleasant place enough," he continued carelessly. "But you ought to have a breath of fresh country air now and then. Do you never take a trip out of town?"

Ah, Valeria! Had one of the Chelsea students—one of the Knightsbridge officers ventured to inquire so closely into her movements, what a haughty look she would have put on—how soon she would have pointed out their error, in terms which they could not possibly mistake! But now she answered readily and eagerly:

"Oh yes, sir! we go sometimes; in fact, we are going to-morrow—"

"May I ask where?" said the musical voice, gently.

"To—to Hampton Court."

"And who may we be?"

"Father, mother, Maria, Cousin John, and myself."

"Cousin John!" said the young gentleman, slightly raising his brows.

"My father's nephew," she somewhat unnecessarily explained. "He helps with the shop."

"Indeed!" he said, pouting his beautiful lip like a spoiled child. "I do not like Cousin John—do you?"

She could not help laughing at the question.

"Why, yes, sir! He has been brought up with us ever since he was three years old; he is like a brother to us."

"Ah, well, that is better! Then you do not approve of cousins marrying?"

"No, sir."

"And you are not going to marry John?"

"No, sir."

"I will forgive him, then. And now I must really go," he said, looking at his watch. "Do you know how long I have been here, eating cherries and talking to you?"

"No, sir."

"Just half an hour by the clock. It is all your fault, you know."

"Why?"

"For looking so beautiful that a poor fellow cannot tear himself away. Ah! forgive me. I ought not to have said that, I know; but don't be angry. Are you angry?"

"Yes, sir," she said, but certainly she did not look so.

He drew off his glove suddenly, leaned over the counter, and held out his small white hand.

"Come, give me yours, and say I am forgiven."

The slightest possible hesitation, for she knew she was doing wrong, as well as you or I, dear reader; then she gave one hurried glance at him, and placed her hand in his, that closed over it with a firm, warm pressure, as if it did not mean to let it go again. The rosy blood stole softly up over cheek and brow, her eyes drooped, her head drooped also, and a slight sigh parted her lips. Leaning forward, so as to screen her from the observation of every passer-by, and casting a hurried glance around the

shop to make sure that they were alone, he went on in a low and trembling voice:

"I noticed you in the Park long ago; I could not help seeing that you were beautiful. I was drawn toward you in an extraordinary way, for which I could not account. But I never expected or hoped to meet you like this. This morning, when I was riding along the Fulham Road, to keep an appointment with a friend, I had no thought of seeing you. But it has all been brought about without any fault of yours or mine. Why should that stirrup-leather have broken before your door any more than another, if it had not been, that through the accident, I was to have this unexpected, this delightful, pleasure," and he pressed her hand closer than ever, and leaned so far over the counter that she could feel his warm breath upon her cheek.

She had been well and carefully brought up. She was naturally reserved, and, perhaps, a little proud. The utmost prudence had always marked her intercourse with the gentlemen who made their purchases of, and uttered their compliments to her; and her father was accustomed to say, with proud exultation, that he could leave his daughter alone in the world without a fear—could go down to the grave, if need be, happy in the thought that, though so young and beautiful, she was able to take care of herself—to be as good and virtuous a woman as her mother had been before her. How did it happen, then, that this stranger, in the course of thirty minutes, had made such progress—had stirred that proud heart, had held that coy hand as no one had ever dared to do before? "The hour and the man" had come—that was all! And Valeria Grant, being only frail flesh and blood, being "only a woman", and a woman in love for the first time, must be excused if in the giddy whirl of tumultuous feeling she forgot for an instant the strict rule of decorum and constraint which had heretofore so easily and so safely guided and guarded her through life. It was one thing to listen to student or soldier with a heart indifferent and at ease—it was quite another to look up into this beautiful face—to hear this musical voice, to feel this warm hand upon her own, and she grew almost frightened when the first thrill of delight had passed away. With a deep blush suffusing her face and neck, she tried to draw her hand away, but he held it fast.

"Do not send me away just yet—I will go in one moment. You need not fear me, I would not harm you for the world. I only want to show you—I must show you, how glad I am to find you out at last. Tell me your name."

"Valeria, sir."

"Valeria! I shall call you 'Vallie'. May I? That is prettier by far, 'Vallie'. Do you object? I shall ride this way, now and then, if you give me leave."

"My father—perhaps you had better not, sir," she stammered.

"Do you not wish to see me again, then?" he asked, sorrowfully.

It was only a look that answered him, but eyes can sometimes say so much! I do not think Valeria was aware how much hers told him then.

"You angel!" he murmured, and bending down his head, before she could prevent him, he pressed his soft lips passionately on her hand.

Valeria was in a fever.

"Don't sir; pray don't do that!" she murmured. "If any one should see you, if my father should come in, what would he say? And it is wrong, you ought not to do it; you know it as well as I do. If you go on like that, sir, I can't see you any more."

Instantly he relinquished her hand, and stepped back with a low bow.

"You are right," he said. "I ought not to have taken such a liberty, and I beg your pardon. But tell me one thing. You have many customers here, no doubt. Do none among them tell you what I have told you, that you are beautiful?"

"Sometimes, sir."

"And what do you say?"

"I ask them not to speak like that to me. I never have to repeat my request, sir."

Her simple air of dignity and innocent pride touched the young man deeply.

"I believe you," he said, fervently. "I am sure that you are as good as you are pretty, and I hope you will always be so. For what occurred just now I am truly sorry; I will never offend again, if you will but forgive me now."

"Yes, I will forgive you."

"And this is not our last meeting? I may see you again? If I pass your door some day in my ride, you will not refuse to speak to me if I come in?"

"No, sir."

"Then good-bye for the present, fair Vallie. I shall remember you, even if you forget me."

He raised his hat respectfully, went out, sprang into the saddle, and rode away.

Valeria remained where he had left her, fixed—rooted to the spot—watching his galloping horse. When he was fairly out of sight, she sighed deeply, sat down in her chair, and covered her face with her hands. Was it all a dream, then—had he really been there—had he looked at her admiringly—called her beautiful? True, he had taken a great liberty; but how earnestly he had apologized for it the next moment. If she had been an earl's daughter, he could not have asked her pardon more respectfully. And his eyes—his voice—ah, me! how that voice kept sounding in her ear, though its music was hushed for a time! As she recalled its varying, even musical tones, another voice, harsh, coarse, and loud, broke in upon her delicious reverie, with:

"Beg pardon, Miss, but how much is cherries the quart?"

With a sigh, she rose to serve the customer—a burly working-man—who was about to invest some of his hard-earned pennies in a dainty dish for his sick child at home. Valeria served him with the best, asked kindly after the little girl, and put the copper he tendered her into the till with her left hand. The fingers which those gentle lips had kissed were not to be profaned by the touch of vulgar coin!

In rushed a tall, good-looking school-girl, at that moment, with her music-books under her arm. This was Maria, who immediately flung her books on a chair, and leaned her elbows on the counter, as she began to talk.

"O Valeria, I wish I was you! I would rather serve the shop than be poring over those musty French verbs all the morning, and then thumping away at that hateful piano all the afternoon. What a shame it is to keep me at the two things I hate the worst! And, after all, what good will it do me? Only to-day I heard that stuck-up little Bell Jordan say, when I went up above her in the class, 'Oh, she's only a greengrocer's daughter! who cares how many prizes she gains?' Horrid little creature, I hate her! And I hate school, and the French verbs, and the piano, and everything else, and I wish I was dead—there!"

"Why, Maria?" said Valeria, gently.

"Well, I do! Where is the use of working hard, only to be told that it does not matter, since you are only a greengrocer's daughter? Why, Miss Finch, the governess, when I won the medal last week, said that she thought it well to encourage people of my station. She did, indeed! And her father was a hair-dresser! Oh, I wish I was an earl's daughter! at least, I wish father would give up this hateful shop."

Possibly, Valeria in her secret heart had often wished the same thing. But Maria's words just then touched a tender chord, and she kindled immediately.

"Are you ashamed of our good, kind father, Maria," she exclaimed, "because he works hard to pay for the very things you and I enjoy? It is not like you! For my part, I am very proud of him, and I would rather be the daughter of an honest greengrocer than the child of a gentleman who disdains to pay his debts—unless it is his gambling debts—like Mr. Jordan. I would not change places with Miss Bell, if you would."

"Well, don't scold, Valeria! You know it

is hard to have such things said before you, when you have been doing your best! But as to being ashamed of my father—bless him!—I would not change him for the Lord Mayor of London—gold, robes, and all. Is dinner ready?"

She ran off to see; and, coming back in ten minutes' time, dragged Valeria away to take her place at the table, while Cousin John did duty in the shop. Well-to-do people were the Grants, and their table was always an abundant one. On this day they had roast mutton, baked potatoes, and batter-pudding. They ate off delf, it is true, and drank their beer out of shining pewter-mugs; but the cloth was clean, the knives and forks bright, the room tidy, and the mistress of the feast wore a new cap and a clean print dress. Mr. Grant sat at the bottom of the table, with Maria on his right hand; Valeria's place was by her mother, and the four smaller children were ranged along the sides. Healthy, happy, and good-tempered creatures they all were, and seasoned their repast with much talk and laughter; but Valeria was strangely silent. Something in the family circle, she knew not what, jarred upon a new sense which had sprung into existence with the stranger's. She loved her mother and father dearly; but to-day she wished that they would not both drink beer. She was very fond of her sisters and brothers; but they had a perfectly miraculous gift for slamming doors, tearing up and down stairs, being in several different parts of the house at once, and talking at the very highest pitch of their very loud voices while there. She noticed these things more than she had ever done before, and liked them less. When the dinner was over, and the servant had cleared the things away, when Maria and the children had gone back to school; when her father had taken Cousin John's place in the shop; and her mother had gone to lie down for what she called her "cat-nap"; then Valeria sought her room to dress. The blue gingham was changed for a pretty, light muslin; a black apron, an embroidered collar and sleeves were donned; her beautiful hair was re-arranged carefully; and then she sat down at her window, which looked out upon the garden, and began to think.

Dangerous, unprofitable reveries! And yet, how sweet are they to the heart of youth! O girls of sixteen, will you not know—O women of thirty, will you not remember what it meant, when Valeria terminated those musings, as the clock of Brompton Church struck four, by pressing her lips, with a lingering touch and a blushing smile, upon her right hand—the hand the stranger had kissed before her, ere that clock tolled the hour of noon?

CHAPTER III.

"I'll no walk by the kirk, mither,
I'll no walk by the manse,
I aye meet wi' the minister
Wha looks at me askance."

"What ails ye at the minister?
A dooce and sober lad,
I trow it isna every day
That sic like can be had."

"Awa, awa, ye glaikit thing,
It's a' that Geordie Young!
The laird has no an e'e like him
Nor the minister a tongue!"

—HENRY GLASSFORD HILL.

The next day dawned as bright and fair as if it had been made to order for the express enjoyment of the greengrocer and his family. There was not a cloud to be seen in the sky, scarcely a breath of wind to be felt among the trees, and Valeria and her sister were fully justified in arraying themselves in bright, soft muslins, imitation lace shawls, and straw hats of the most fashionable shape and style. Mrs. Grant having a less artistic taste than her eldest daughter, wore a brown barege dress with three flounces, a hot-looking but really comfortable variegated shawl, in whose border crimson was the most prominent and decided color; a Leghorn bonnet, trimmed with green ribbon, and Lisle thread gloves. The girls carried dainty parasols, fringed and tasseled; but Mrs. Grant was above such nonsense. There was no trusting the sky in England, she wisely said, and

being an old woman, she need not worry her mind about her complexion. So, in the place of parasol or parachute, she equipped herself with an alpaca umbrella, large enough to fell an ox. It was shabby—it was rusty—it bulged and bagged almost as much as "Mrs. Gamp's", and it had a vulgar wooden handle and an iron ferule. Altogether, Valeria shuddered at the sight of the thing, and even Maria, who was most indulgent in matters of the toilet, eyed it askance upon this warm sunny day. But neither of them ventured to allude to it in any way. Mrs. Grant might not be the most refined of mortals, but, though a kind wife and an affectionate mother, she was most decidedly head and mistress of her household, and no member of it would have been rash enough to hint at a fault in her management or her appearance.

If you do not mind what "people say", or if you happen to be a stranger in London, with no one to take heed where you go or what you do, there is no greater fun than going in a van to Hampton Court. You see the most ludicrous things, and sometimes the most pathetic ones, in your journey of a day; and, if you are a student of human nature, you will be well repaid for the jaunt by the new additions to the collection, in "your mind's eye", of human foibles, good traits, and oddities. But Mrs. Grant was no such student, and, like most persons of her class and in her circumstances, had a horror of anything so common as a van—she would have called it "a wan". No; "let us be genteel or die" was her motto, in a very humble way, and so the handsome cart (brown striped with green) was brought out from the stable, and the fast-trotting bay mare harnessed to it by the hands of cousin John, while she and her daughters were arraying themselves up-stairs. The cart had two wide seats, nicely cushioned with American patent leather. The mare was a pretty, clean-limbed, high-stepping, wicked-looking little animal; the harness was silver-plated; the whip one of the handsomest that money could buy. Altogether, the "turn out" was a most unexceptionable one in its way. Mrs. Grant stood looking at it with pride in her eyes, while her husband was looking for his driving-gloves, which (man-like) he had thrown into some remote corner of the house at the last time of using. Certainly, although the lady despised the "wan", she was to be commended for the genuine contentment displayed in every feature of her face as she gazed at her own equipage. She might wish to be genteel, but she had no foolish thoughts of rising above her station. She might like to be thought rich and prosperous by her neighbors, since she really was so, but she was a greengrocer's wife all the while, and never dreamed of aspiring to a higher title. Maria, almost as well pleased as her mother, hovered about her, settling her collar and tying her bonnet-strings afresh with a gentle hand.

"I do like to go in style anywhere," observed her mother, confidentially. "And the mare looks so well to-day. She won't be long taking us down there, lovely. I do hope the children will behave well. And, oh dear me! where's the basket?"

"All right, mother. Here it is!" said Mr. Grant, coming through the shop. "Drat the gloves—I can't spend any more time looking for them, and my hands ain't so white that the sun will hurt them—eh, Valeria? Here's your luncheon, mother. I'll put it under the back seat. It's precious heavy, I can tell you!"

"So it ought to be, George. I've no notion of going to Hampton Court to starve. I went there once like a fool, without anything to eat. Catch me at it again, that's all! They may keep their dinners at the hotels for me—I don't want any more of them. It's a mercy I wasn't poisoned that day!"

"So 'tis, mother; for I don't know what on earth we should have done without you!" replied Mr. Grant, helping her to her seat in the cart, as gallantly as if she had still been a girl of sixteen.

Cousin John gave his hand first to Valeria—then to Maria, and assumed his place upon the back seat between them. The servant waved a

smiling good-bye from the door, the children cheered vigorously, the well-fed mare tossed her head and heels in the air, and rattled them away, as if five people and a cart were a mere nothing in her eyes. They were off; the day of pleasure, so long looked forward to, had begun.

Valeria had once longed for it, almost as earnestly as Maria; but, now that it had really come, something marred and spoiled all her enjoyment. Maria and her Cousin John gazed about them curiously, as they threaded the city streets, examined the shop windows, cracked jokes with the worthy pair upon the front seat, or exchanged laughing remarks upon the front passengers; but Valeria sat silent, scarcely looking to the right or the left, only feeling, with a miserable sense of degradation, that she was riding in a cart instead of a carriage; and that, in the place of coroneted panels and heraldic devices, that hateful

"Grant, Greengrocer and Fruiterer, Brompton!" stared everybody in the face as they passed by.

"The girl was a fool!" you will say. I suppose she was. And as ungrateful as she could be, into the bargain. What if her mother did wear a brown, flounced dress, and crimson shawl, and carry a horrible "Mrs. Gamp" umbrella? Was she not her mother still—her kind, good mother, who had watched over her tenderly during her infancy, and who was ready to make any and every sacrifice for the comfort and happiness of her child, just when the child was gazing with coldly critical eyes at her shoulders, and thinking in her own heart how very broad they were growing? Ah, me! rely upon it, Miss Valeria will be well punished for her pride and self-conceit before this story comes to an end. In the meantime, abuse her as much as you like—I shall not pen a word of excuse or pleading in her cause.

It so happened that there was a regatta at Hampton Court that day, and the place was crowded with sightseers of every kind. There were soldiers and their sweethearts by the score, there were jolly tars "out for a cruise", there were cockneys of every grade, plowing their way through the dust toward the place—all looking happy to an insane degree.

It was delightful to watch the bright faces—to hear the merry voices and loud laughter on every side. Mrs. Grant enjoyed it thoroughly, but being a practical woman, she decided upon refreshing her troops before leading them into action. Accordingly the mare was well stabled, the cart put under cover, and then dismissing all the hotel and tea-room touters, who were in her path, with a curt, "I came here to eat, not to be poisoned!" she led the way to a green eminence, a little way out of the town, where a group of trees formed a most welcome shelter from the burning sun. There, with the distant voices of the multitude, and the sweet strains of the military band, forming a pleasant accompaniment to their merry talk, they ate their noonday meal in peace.

Who does not remember that ludicrous picture in Punch, of a "swell", who is discovered by his horrified friends in a high state of exhilaration, upon the box seat of a sixpenny 'bus?

"Look here!" he exclaims, holding up a nondescript atom to their gaze. "I've found out something new! I go up and down, from Whitechapel to Bayswater, outside, and eat periwinkles with a pin—all the way!"

A new sensation! The poor wretch (you can see it in his face) has smoked, and yawned, and danced through a whole London season, has been bored to death by friends and duns—has looked at the Thames from Waterloo Bridge, and wondered if it would "pay" to throw himself in—has tired of everything and everybody, and every place—and has at last found out this grand receipt for ennui. The man is saved!

Some people might look at this picture and laugh at it, without a thought of its hidden meaning. When I first saw it I was lounging in a friendly study—listless—idle—blue—bored—tired—sick at heart—and feeling as if any one who knocked me on the head quietly would

confer a lasting benefit on the world in general. Then came that gentleman with his periwinkles, and whispered in my ear, "Look at me! Is it not true, that when every expensive and hard-to-be-got-at pleasure has been exhausted, the simplest one may do as well?" And I took the lesson to my heart, and was a better and a wiser woman thereafter.

It would have been well, perhaps, for George Monair if he could have seen that sketch on the morning after his first interview with Valeria Grant. He had gone down that same evening to Norwood to dine with an aunt, from whom he had great expectations. The dinner was heavy, and the evening dull. When he retired at eleven he dared not smoke; his aunt hated cigars. He slept ill, rose late, and was snubbed for it by his aunt, who was always out of her bed by six, A. M., winter and summer. So, after breakfast, Mr. Monair went out, feeling cross, bored, and miserable. He had but one resource—to take a walk, and thereby keep out of the way till he could make his adieus with decency.

Across the fields he strolled, till he came out upon Streatham Common. Quaint, delicious, green old place; how it rises up before me! how I feel its breezes blow even as I write the name! You will observe that these are my impressions of the place, not Mr. Monair's. To him the Common was simply a dull and dreary waste, where the furze bushes impeded his path. He looked up at the blue sky with an impatient groan, and decapitated thistle after thistle with his ebony walking-stick.

"What a bore it is to live!" was his mental commentary on all the loveliness that surrounded him; "especially in the country, where, unless people fall to and eat grass as these cattle are doing, I see no amusement for them. Nebuchadnezzar might possibly have liked it, but I don't, and I wish my aunt would either give me the money out of hand or die and leave it to me, so that I might never have to come here any more."

Another fearful yawn, and another luckless thistle beheaded. Then a new idea seemed to strike the listless young gentleman. He flushed up, brightened up, looked at his watch, and smiled.

"Time enough to do it, and the experiment is really worth trying. Here goes."

With that he set off at a furious pace toward his aunt's villa, bade that lady a hurried farewell, rushed to the station, from thence to London Bridge, and then by cab to Waterloo. A train was just about starting as he drove up. He secured a ticket, ran at full speed along the platform, threw himself, panting and breathless, into a first-class carriage, and was off for Hampton Court.

The "fun of the fair" was nearly over when he arrived. The last boat-race was being contested as he crossed the bridge, and the popping of a cannon, about the size of a pocket-pistol, on the bank, and the cheers of the people, heralded the approach of the victor—a gallant young waterman—the Queen's waterman, in fact, who wore his distinctive dress and badge, and came up the stream laughing good-naturedly at his triumph and his welcome. Mr. Monair glanced an instant over the animated scene but failed to discover the face and form he sought. It was rather a wild-goose chase, I must confess; for he did not even know how the fair Valeria was dressed; but, trusting to his usual good luck, he went into the Palace-grounds in search of her. She was not in the palace itself—a hasty race through the great hall and the picture-galleries assured him of that fact. She was not in the cloisters, nor beside the fountain, nor in the maze, nor viewing the mammoth grape-vine. Where had she got to? Perhaps she had not come at all.

I am afraid that at that moment Mr. Monair was guilty of uttering a very naughty word. But it was not very pleasant to imagine his lady love peaceably weighing out green-gages and plums in Brompton, while he was broiling in the hot sun at Hampton Court, for her sweet sake.

"Serves me right!" he muttered, discontentedly. "What the deuce—as my dear uncle

would say—do I want of the girl, at all? It would be much better for us both, no doubt, and for me most certainly, if we should never meet again. So I had better search no more for her here, visit her no more at Brompton; but go home, like a good boy, and stick faithfully to my cousin Isabel."

As he came to this sensible conclusion, he stood beneath the shadow of that green-arched walk, in the gardens, which everybody knows, and which all lovers, it may be, remember—and as he gazed fixedly upon the ground, he was "made ware", in some mysterious way, of the presence of a new-comer. A slender, pretty girl, wearing a lace shawl and a gipsy hat, tripped lightly up the steps. Behind her came a tall, good-looking young man, and a young girl, who were more intent upon each other than upon their companion's movements.

Mr. Monair started, the lady turned very pale. But she was by far the most self-possessed of the two, and made him a hurried sign, which he construed as a command to keep silence. Cousin John and Maria went eagerly on; but Valeria pleaded fatigue, and said she would wait in the covered walk till they returned. Without even noticing the tall gentleman who stood in the entrance, lost in admiration of the scenery, they left her and went on her way, laughing and talking like two children just let loose from school.

In an instant the gentleman was by Valeria's side.

"Oh, how kind of you!" he murmured, lifting her hand to his lips—this time unreprieved. "I came here purposely to see you."

"I must not stay an instant—my father and mother are close behind," she murmured, blushing deeply beneath his ardent gaze. "Only I did not like to pass you without speaking."

"I should think not. But, Vallie, when am I to see you again? I want to talk with you. I have thought of you ever since I left your father's shop. May I write to you?"

"I don't know. Oh, go, sir—go at once! I hear my mother's voice. Pray go!"

"Say I may write, then."

"Yes—yes—but pray go now!"

He kissed her hand again and darted away. She hurried to the entrance to meet her mother, who was summoning her party together, in order to retire. John and Maria had already obeyed her call, Mr. Grant was waiting at the gate, only Valeria remained.

"Why, child, how hot you look!" cried the unsuspicious mother, as they went down the long avenue together. "The day has tired us all out, I think. I shall be glad to get home, for one."

Valeria answered nothing. She was silent during the long ride home—silent at the supper-table—silent when she went to bed.

A journey to Hampton Court and back, for the sake of exchanging a dozen words with each other! Was it worth your while? you say. My dear, you know as well as I do, that when a woman is in love, for the first time, she will journey from Dan to Beersheba, without a thought of fatigue, only to get a glimpse of her idol's shoe-strings. While a man, in the same interesting predicament, might possibly undertake the same journey, but would grumble at the length and badness of the road all the way, and would most assuredly require post-horses, or a seat in the train, as he came back.

CHAPTER IV.

"Hears he me—hears he me there—
How I sit singing here—
Sit alone, singing here?
Wind which blows here and there
Over the tree-tops bare,
Over high mountain and sea,
Oh, tear from his breast
A word to give me rest,
And my answer take back with thee."

—SWEDISH SONG.

In an elegantly furnished morning-room, looking out upon a small, though pleasant, garden in Half-moon street, Piccadilly, sat George Monair, with his aunt and his cousin, Isabel, the heiress in her own right of the family fortune and the family estates. Mrs. Monair was a tall, pale, elegant, but feeble-looking old lady, of a

somewhat sentimental and melancholy turn of mind. Her daughter was a bright, sparkling brunette of twenty-one. She was small and slight, but upright as a soldier, graceful in all her movements, and easy and finished in her manners as a Parisian belle. Her hair was dead black; wavy and luxuriant to an extraordinary degree. Her features were exquisitely molded; her forehead was low and broad; her nose slightly aquiline; her lips thin, but beautifully shaped, and of the most vivid crimson. A bright color tinged her olive cheek, her teeth were dazzling white, and often displayed by a somewhat peculiar smile; her eyes were large, bright, and sparkling, and fringed with inky lashes, so long that when she looked down they almost touched her cheek.

A beautiful face, you will say; and so it ought to have been. At the first glance, when you marked the regularity of feature, the perfection of contour, the warmth, and light, and bloom of coloring, you were inclined to think it very fair. As Isabel Monair passed through the streets in her mother's carriage, or cantered down Rotten Row upon her favorite pony, the bystanders noting her small but elegant figure, and radiant face, said admiringly to each other: "What a handsome woman!" As she glided through the dance in the stately halls of her aristocratic friends, those who caught a glimpse of her as she floated by, called her "a Peri", "a Grace", the "Spirit of the Waltz", or any other poetic name which happened to strike their heated fancies. But it was noticeable that her partners never lavished these flattering epithets upon her. The young men who rode beside her in the Park, who had the felicity of holding her delicate hand, or encircling her fairy waist in the ball-room, said but little about her, and that little was not always in her favor. "A prettyish girl; an elegant girl; a clever girl; a lady-like girl". Those were the epithets, cold as ice, chaste as the lady Moon, with which they honored her. In one sense of the word, they talked to and danced with her as if she had been a grandmother of seventy instead of a woman of twenty-one. You never heard of any rash young ensign writing a challenge, or any disconsolate lover blowing out his brains for the sake of Miss Monair. They might, perhaps, do these things for a girl with a snub nose and indifferent gray eyes, and so set all the world talking; but not for her—the beauty, the heiress, and the belle. In fact, she had no lover, disconsolate or otherwise. Girls who came out in her first season had hunted down their noble prey—had married dukes, earls, and marquises, on the right and on the left—but Miss Monair fired her guns, barbed her hooks, and spread her nets in vain. Men paid her cold attentions it may be during a whole season, and then fluttered off at the end and proposed to some baby-faced chit, without a penny to call her own.

I have said that she had no lovers. It may be that she would have contradicted this statement, since she was engaged—had been engaged almost from her childhood—to her cousin, George Monair. When she was under the care of her governess, and he at Eton, they had been little lovers; and the contract made mutually in those happy days, had never been broken, in the letter at least, by either of them. To all intents and purposes, her cousin George was as much her own now as he had been then. If she had any suspicion that his heart had strayed from her, she did not dream how far. On her part, the somewhat romantic fancy of her school-girl days had subsided, and a calm and very rational attachment had taken its place. If any one of higher rank or brighter prospects had laid heart, hand, and fortune at her feet, Master George would speedily have had to wear the willow. As her success in matters of this kind proved so small, she had no idea of relinquishing her hold upon him. Miss Monair must never fade and pine away in single blessedness. To get married somehow, anyhow, and with as little sacrifice of pride of place as might be—this was her only aim. George was handsome, fascinating, of good birth, of pleasing address; and when the proper time came, she would endow him with her broad acres and her well-filled

purse, in return for the magic plain gold ring, and the respectable sanctuary of hearth and home. In the meantime, let him take his pleasure—let her take hers. No woman, I think, ever laid plans for the future more quietly, less romantically, than Miss Monair.

But although, aside from his beauty and his grace, she did not care two pins for her cousin George, still she looked upon him as her property, and could be intensely jealous of him, if he seemed in any way to ignore her claims. On this day he was in sad disgrace. In taking his impromptu trip in Hampton Court, he had entirely forgotten a prior engagement. With Miss Monair and her mother, he had to call that very afternoon upon a ceremonious old baroness, who had been his and Isabel's godmother. The ladies went alone; and the baroness's two ugly daughters, who had both picked up husbands, in the shape of good-looking young commoners, steeled politely at Isabel on account of her lover's defection, and managed, in that quiet way which women understand so well, to let her know that they considered her a less attractive magnet to George Monair than others whom they would not mention. Miss Isabel went away, smiling and courteous outwardly, inwardly in a furious rage. She sat at home and sulked all that evening, but no lover came to woo; in fact, George had but just made his appearance, and it was the fifth day after the Hampton Court excursion. Who can wonder that his *fiancée* was determined to find out the reason of this mysterious absence?

He came in with a very guilty look, as if he expected a sound scolding. But, much to his surprise and relief, Isabel received him with the utmost kindness; played for him, sang for him, and made herself as agreeable as she possibly could. He drew a long breath.

"I'm well out of that scrape," he thought. Just as he took up his hat to go, she called him to her seat in the garden window. Her favorite parrot croaked and muttered upon the back of her chair. A little table on her right was covered with fancy-work and embroidery, and in her hand she held a skein of coarse crimson silk.

"Will you help me wind this, George?" she said.

He put down his hat, sank gallantly on one knee before her, and held out his hands for the skein. There she had him. The light was full on his face, his hands were bound, her mother could not hear what she was saying, as fixing her sparkling eyes on his, she asked in the most matter-of-fact way:

"And where were you on Thursday, George? You were to have taken us to Lady De Clare's, you know."

For the life of him he could not help it. He would have given worlds not to blush, but with that searching glance full upon him, the color flew up to his forehead in an instant.

"On Thursday?" he stammered. "Why—why, I was at my aunt's in Norwood."

"Only till one o'clock, George. I saw your aunt yesterday. We dined there; and she told me that you went back to town by the one o'clock train."

He was silent.

"You were to have been here by three. Where did you go?"

"Well you see, Bell," he replied, affecting extreme candor, "I wanted a breath of fresh air, and so I went on the river."

"Which way?"

The code of fashionable morality teaches you to pay your gambling debts, not your tailors, and forbids you to tell a lie to your brother officer or your gentleman friend, not to a woman, even though she be your sweetheart or your wife! So Mr. Monair felt no scruple of conscience as he answered glibly:

"I went to Kew."

"Indeed! And who went with you?"

"Oh! Blake. You know Blake?"

"Very well indeed, George. He called at Lady De Clare's while we were there on Thursday, and escorted us to Hyde Park afterward. Very singular, is it not, that Captain Blake can be in two places at once. I never knew he he possessed that wonderful gift before."

George dashed down the silk, sprang to his feet, caught up his hat, and pulled his handkerchief from his breast-pocket, in order partially to conceal his now burning face. As he did so, a letter, neatly sealed, stamped, and directed, fell to the floor. Quick as thought, Isabel put her foot upon it, and shook out the voluminous flounces of her dress, so as to hide it completely from his eye. When he looked at her again, she was quietly disentangling the knots he had made in the skein of silk.

"I tell you what it is, Bell, he said, bending down over her, "I will not be cross-questioned in this way by any woman on earth. I am very sorry I forgot to call for you as I promised to do. I apologize for the breach of courtesy with all my heart. More than that I cannot say, but if you think I am going to give you a strict account of every moment I spend away from this house, you are vastly mistaken. It will be quite time enough for you to begin that sort of inquisition when we are married, if we ever are."

He spoke the last words very low—more to himself than to her—but she heard them. She put down her silk, and waited coldly for him to go. He held out his hand, but she took no notice of it, only bent her head slightly, and turned away to her embroidery again.

"Just as you choose," he said, in a huff, and bidding his aunt good-bye, he left the room.

Isabel waited till she heard the hall-door close behind him, then she snatched up the letter from the floor. It was addressed to "Miss Valeria Grant (at Mr. Grant's, Green-grocer and Fruiterer), Fulham Road, Brompton, S. W.", and sealed with the device of the Monairs, an eagle gazing at the sun. Without the least hesitation, she tore it open, and read these words:

"FAIREST OF MY FRIENDS:—To see you as I saw you on Thursday at Hampton Court, or yesterday in your father's shop, is but a poor reward for all my thoughts of you. I long to talk with you—to hear you talk more than I have already done. Send me a line to say if you and your young sister can go to any place of amusement together. I will meet and escort you there with your permission."

"I shall expect a note from you to-morrow—do not fail to write. You little know how I think of you, Valeria; you need not fear me, I have only the most honorable intentions toward you, and it only rests with you to say if you will share my heart and home for ever, as my dear and honored wife. Faithfully yours,

"GEORGE MONAIR."

Miss Monair uttered an exclamation after perusing this note, that quickly brought her mother to her side.

"What is it, my dear?"

"You may well ask, mamma. George did not come to us on Thursday, because he was better engaged. Look here. In this letter he offers to marry some greengrocer's daughter whom he has met—offers to marry her, and he is engaged to me! Oh, I shall go mad with rage!"

She certainly looked anything but safe or sane as she sat there, grinding her teeth and stamping her feet, pale with passion and with hate.

Mrs. Monair was terrified at the sight, but all the consolation she could give took one stereotyped form.

"Wait till the Colonel comes, my dear, and don't excite yourself so. It is his day for calling; and the Colonel can always set things straight, you know."

CHAPTER V.

"Tell him, oh, tell him, my breast
Never, never has rest,
Day and night has no rest!
Wed me before the priest,
Let me in silk be dressed.
Oh, why took I the ring from my friend?
Haste, faithless one, haste,
I will hold thee fast,
And keep thee till winter again!"

—OLD SWEDISH SONG.

At three o'clock that afternoon, Colonel Monair did himself the honor of making his usual weekly call upon his sister and his niece. The Colonel had been a bachelor for more than sixty years, and was as methodical in his habits as any human being could very well be. He always rose exactly at eight, breakfasted at nine, took a "constitutional", wet or dry, hot or cold, from ten till twelve, and passed the remainder

of the day in the Park and at the club, unless some pleasant engagement took him elsewhere; and he always made his appearance at the house in Half Moon street with such military precision at three o'clock, every Tuesday during the season, that Isabel and her mother would have been seriously alarmed if, by any chance, he had not come.

The colonel was, really and truly, sixty-five, but his best friends never ventured to tell him so. With the help of Truefitt, he sported a most luxuriant crop of black curls, slightly tinged and streaked with gray. His teeth were white and dazzling, his cheeks and lips still bloomed, his hands were white as snow, and his figure was almost as upright and slender as when he had been the pet of Almack's in his early days. His manners were faultless, his voice was low and musical, his whole appearance eminently calculated to strike the eye and win the fancy of any unsophisticated woman who looked upon him. His large black eyes still smiled and spoke, the crow's feet at their corners were skillfully disguised by the hand of his French valet, his waist was laced, his chest was padded, his trousers were strapped down, his coat buttoned up, his boots fitted tight to his small feet—in short, Art did for the gallant Colonel in his old age all, and more than all, that Nature in his youth had done. He was a powdered, painted, peruked, tightlaced, vain, disreputable old sinner, but at the first glance you could only discern in him a well-dressed, fine-looking, gentlemanly man, a little past middle age. Although he had lost all his teeth, and his head under his wig was as bald as a coot's, he had not forgotten the sins of his youth. He chuckled over them before young men in a way that was horrible to see, and he was still for ever leering in the face of every decent-looking woman he met, or giving a fancied chase to pretty shop-girls along the pavement, with his tightly-shod, half-gouty feet. He fancied these little displays of weakness toward the softer sex gave him a claim to rank with the younger generation who were following fast in his footsteps, even while they laughed among themselves at his ridiculous folly.

Yet, with all these faults, he had a certain reverence for his beautiful and highly-educated niece. She bore his name, his blood ran in her veins; and if any one had wronged her, his sword would have been first to avenge the insult. He was very fond of her in his own way, and submitted to her caprices, and allowed her to order him about with a patience that was truly edifying. And she repaid him by giving him more affection than she bestowed upon any human being, except her cousin George.

The hard old man and the worldly young woman suited each other to a hair. He was ambitious for her, she was ambitious for herself. Neither of them had one grain of faith in any human being except their two selves; yet that faith in each other, strange to say, it would have been very hard to shake. They were both selfish, both cruel; and neither of them would have hesitated, for an instant, to rid themselves of any obstacle in their onward path, by fair means, if possible; and, if not, by foul.

Isabel, having been accustomed to confide all her childish and girlish perplexities to her uncle, and to form her heartless life by his heartless precepts, had waited his coming most anxiously on this sunny afternoon. He found her sitting at the piano, singing, with passionate energy, a song from "Norma"; while her mother slept placidly over a novel, in her softly-cushioned chair. The strong contrast between the two; the old life done with dreaming, and the young one hot, eager, and restless, struck even the unimaginative man of the world; and, pausing an instant to assure himself that his sister-in-law still slept, he came up very softly behind his niece, and said:

"Well, what is the matter, now? I always know something has gone wrong when I hear you singing that song."

She whirled suddenly round upon her music-stool, and took both his hands in hers, and said, in a low voice:

"Uncle, somewhere the other day, I don't know where, I read a story about a woman, who had contrived to get her husband hung by betraying his political secrets, because she fancied he loved some one else better than he loved her. After he was dead she went mad; and she used to go to the square, where they had lived in their happy days, and look down the area, and cling to the rails, saying all the while, 'Jealousy is the devil! Jealousy is the devil! Did you ever read the story?'"

"No, my dear. And I should be very sorry to meet that lady. I hope she didn't live in my square. It would be dooed unpleasant to have such a visitor as that, say about one or two o'clock in the morning; wouldn't it, Bell?"

"Undoubtedly. But never mind her. I was not thinking of her, only of what she said."

"Jealousy is the devil."

"Yes. Were you ever jealous, uncle?"

"Scores of times; and horribly so. Gad! I know how to pity that poor old Othello. I've suffered all he suffered over and over again, and all for a good-for-nothing little chit, who never cared two straws for me. Ugh! I'm glad that time has gone by, Bell. A man does not want a taste of that dose more than once or twice in his life."

"I'm glad to hear you suffered, uncle."

"What do you mean, minx?"

"Only this, that you will know how to feel for me." She glanced toward her sleeping mother, and went on almost in a whisper: "Uncle, I am jealous, too."

"The dooce you are!"

The Colonel wished with all his heart that the revelation would stop there. He knew that she was going to talk about his nephew, and it was a sore subject with him. George was engaged to her, it was true, but he was by no means a St. Anthony; and divers little escapades of his had recently come to his uncle's knowledge, about which he was horribly afraid Bell was about to question him. For though with her mother she assumed all the innocence and harmlessness of the dove, with her uncle she often displayed more of the wisdom of the serpent; and, without positively infringing any strict rule of propriety, spoke freely of things that are generally "tabooed" for British maidens, under pain of fearful penalties.

His misgivings were stilled, however, as she went on.

"I am jealous—oh, horribly jealous, uncle! Do you know what George has been doing?"

"No, my dear. But you really must not tie him too closely to your apron-string. Young men will be young men, you know."

"Oh, I am not complaining of anything of that kind!" she said, with a wicked laugh in her black eyes. "This is something quite different—something that you ought to know. What do you think of his marrying a greengrocer's daughter?"

"What!" shrieked the Colonel, so loudly, that he started Mrs. Monair from her quiet slumbers.

"There, you have waked mamma. However, she knows all about it, so there is no harm done. I was just telling Uncle Alfred about the greengrocer's daughter, mamma."

"Yes. How do you do, Alfred? Did you ever hear of anything so shocking? The boy must be mad."

"But, what is it, my dear sister? What does Bell mean?"

"Tell him, Bell."

"The matter is this, my dear uncle. George has fallen in with some horrid creature at Brompton, who sells potatoes and onions in her father's shop, and they have been to Hampton Court together; and now he is offering to marry her, although he is engaged to me. And the creature's name is Valeria—of all names in the world. Here is a letter to her, which he dropped out of his pocket while he was here this morning."

The Colonel took that *billet-doux*, over which poor George had breathed so many sighs, and read it through. His hands shook as he laid it down, and wiped his gold-framed spectacles.

"A very serious piece of business," he remarked. "With that letter in her possession,

the girl could sue him for breach of promise, if he married you, Bell. As you justly say, he must be mad. And where is he now, pray?"

"At the feet of his lady-love at Brompton, I dare say," said Isabel, scornfully. "Perhaps serving in the shop, with a white apron tied round his waist."

Mrs. Monair groaned.

"Not quite so bad as that, I hope," said the Colonel. "But what could have possessed the boy to write such a letter. If he likes the girl, why don't he—?" He checked himself, suddenly remembering who he was talking to, and went on again—"That is to say, he must give her up at once. We can't have a greengrocer's daughter in the family."

"A creature who would want to shell her own peas for dinner, and afterward eat them with a knife," said Isabel, smiling. "No, uncle, we cannot afford to call cousins with a lady of that description just yet."

"Why can't you see him, Alfred—or talk to him—or do something?" suggested Mrs. Monair, feebly.

"Why, so I will; and the sooner the better. There is a boat-race at Putney, this afternoon—I shouldn't wonder if I found him there. At all events, I will ride up and see. What are you laughing at, Bell?"

"Nothing, uncle—only my own thoughts."

She was smiling to see how her uncle made even the slightest benefit conferred upon another, tally with his own exclusive plans and pleasures.

At Putney, in a villa by the water's side, lived a certain rich widow, whose hand and purse the Colonel coveted, and it was more than likely that, his nephew once found and lectured, he would spend his evening comfortably in the widow's drawing-room, thus killing two birds neatly with one and the self-same stone.

"I will go home and order my horse at once," he said, rising from his seat. "Bell, my dear, don't you fret about him; once out of this scrape, we will have him safely married—then it will be all your own fault if he goes philandering about after greengrocers' pretty daughters any more."

"I will take good care of that," said Bell, significantly. "But remember one thing, uncle. He must break this off, and at once. I don't care if the girl kills herself, starves, and dies. No one shall say that Isabel Monair has been slighted for a common creature like that."

"Bell, my dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Monair, gently, as she heard this speech. But the Colonel nodded his head approvingly.

"You'll do, Bell," he said, as she followed him out to the head of the stairs, to say good-bye; "and we will very soon bring that young fellow to his senses between us."

"We will try, at least," she answered. "And, uncle, while you are at Putney, couldn't you manage to call on Mrs. Dalton, and say how very anxious we are to see her again?"

The Colonel looked up at the laughing face, peered into the depths of the flashing, wicked, black eyes, and shook his head quizzically.

"You're too clever for me, Bell—too clever by half! Good-bye to you!"

The Colonel did not find his nephew at Putney. He arrived there just as the last race was on, and checking his horse beneath the window of "The London Rowing Club", he gazed with heart and soul upon the exciting scene—at the light boats skimming over the water like birds—at the crowded penny steamers, whose occupants waved their handkerchiefs and cheered as the rival champions darted by—at the shouting, eager throng that ran along the path, or waited more calmly near him upon the shore. When the race was won, he cast a hasty look around the groups of young men who were discussing its merits, saw nothing of his nephew, and rode away to call on the widow, fully satisfied that he had done everything that could possibly be required of him.

Mrs. Dalton was very ungracious that evening. She snubbed the Colonel, and talked all during tea-time of a wonderful young dissenting minister who was just then thrilling the

neighborhood of Putney with his eloquent sermons. The Colonel, though he scarcely ever entered a place of worship, and never thought of saying his prayers, called himself a staunch Church of England man, and so felt bound to object sturdily to this gentleman, especially as he was young and good-looking. The widow grew indignant, and the consequence was a violent quarrel, which made the chance of sharing her home and purse look exceedingly dubious. Mentally anathematizing her stupidity and his own folly, the Colonel bade her adieu, and rode sullenly toward home again. But the night was a little chilly, and his coat was thin; and he caught a violent cold which laid him up for a week, and effectually put all thoughts of his own or his nephew's wooings out of his head while it lasted. How Isabel would have raged, had she known it!

And, meanwhile, where was the young scapegrace in whom they both took so deep an interest? On that very afternoon of the Putney boat-race, he was playing at the old riddle of walking "round and round the house, and all about the house"—that is to say, he was walking up and down Hans Place, and round and round Sloane square, till even the cabmen on the stand seemed to understand the state of the case, and forbore to urge him to enter a vehicle, but grinned good-naturedly to each other as he passed by. Why was this? Because he was not taking that walk alone. On his arm hung a pretty, sweet-faced girl, modestly dressed, graceful in her walk, and quiet in her manner; but, oh, so happy! You could see it in her face, her eyes—you could hear it in every tone of her sweet, low voice. There is a sort of halo thrown around young and innocent lovers, by the magic of their love, that the hardest heart can scarcely fail to see. Only yesterday, as I went from London Bridge to Norwood, I sat opposite a pair who had evidently just entered upon the first and far most delicious stage of that respectable folly. They were engaged—I could have sworn to that—and just engaged. There was a look of conscious proprietorship in the young man's face, and an expression of gentle content at being owned in that of the girl, that told the tale most plainly. Only us three in the carriage; and I suppose I must have looked very benign and indulgent; for, after a time, they took no more notice of me than if I had been a piece of stone wall. The lady's hand rested in her lover's, his head leaned gently toward her shoulder; and when we entered the tunnel, I thought I heard something which was not exactly like the shriek of the engine, or the puffing of the steam. Out into the sunlight we came once more—they gazing fondly into each other's eyes, I looking intently out of the window, and thinking to myself, "What happy young fools they are! and what a pity it is such pleasant folly cannot last for ever!"

So I suppose the cabmen thought, as they watched the youthful pair, and remembered the time when they took their "missises" (young and blooming then, and without the six crying children at their heels) out walking in pleasant country fields, "a wee before the sun gaed down." So thought, perhaps, the maid-servants who eyed them curiously from doorsteps and area-windows, or from behind the perambulators, whose stony-hearted course they were for ever directing straight upon pedestrians' toes. But Maria, walking behind, in all the glory of a new mantle and her best muslin dress, never dreamed that so pleasant a state of things must end. Of course they would love each other for ever and for ever, and better and better every day, and then they would marry, and live in a beautiful house, and she should go and see them, and perhaps at last find a young gentleman as rich and beautiful as Mr. Monair to marry her. Never had a duenna a greater faith in her charge, and her charge's future, than this one of thirteen years, with her school-satchel still hanging on her arm.

That pleasant afternoon walk decided, in a great measure, the fate of both. Before the lovers parted, they were formally engaged. And George Monair, bidding the two girls adieu, at the corner of Sloane-street, walked thoughtfully toward his lodgings, considering what on

earth he should do in this perplexing state of things.

He had not been gone ten minutes from his aunt's house, when he missed the letter which he had written to Valeria. He dared not return for it. He knew that it was in the breast-pocket of his coat, and that when he took out his handkerchief, the letter must have fallen to the floor. Isabel sat directly in front of him, and her eyes were as sharp as needles. Was it likely that she had failed to see it? Absurd! She had opened and read it by that time—he knew her ways so well!

"I'm in for a row, and no mistake," he thought, perfectly aghast at his carelessness and its consequences. "An awful row, for Bell will blow the roof of the house off, if she once reads that offer of marriage. And so Half-Moon street, I think I had better bid you 'a long and last adieu'—for the present at least!"

Jaunty and self-possessed, in spite of his frightful blunder, he hurried out to Brompton, waylaid Maria on her way from school, and, by her help, contrived to get Valeria out for a walk in the squares before tea-time—that walk which I have already described. One word led to another, and almost before he knew what he was saying, the young man found himself committed, bound fast and firm to one woman, by word of mouth, when all the while he was tacitly engaged to another. It was, indeed, what he called it as he walked along Piccadilly—"an exceedingly pretty kettle of fish, and no mistake about it!"

What ailed him, do you say? I'm sure I do not know. I believe we are all mildly insane once in a while, and his turn had come, that was all. Only by the charitable supposition of insanity can I account for that apparent desperation which seizes now and then upon men and women alike. Good, quiet, heavily-molded people never feel these impulses to do everything that is criminal and absurd, and they would set you down as a lunatic, or something worse, if you confessed, in their presence, to being occasionally subject to them. But nervous, high-strung, keenly-tempered people will know what I mean. 'Tis a malign influence that points toward a sharp razor, or a leap from Waterloo Bridge, as the best means of settling the dreary problem of living; or, taking a less physical but far more morally dangerous form, whispers recklessly into our ears:

"Going down hill—all is wrong—life is a blunder, and you are a fool! Why should you hesitate at anything since Fate and the world are both against you? Be bad—be mad—be wicked—do your worst, and it will answer quite as well as your best! Who cares—and who is afraid?"

That evil spirit was whispering in my hero's ear on this very day. He was poor, he was deeply in debt, he was harassed by duns, he was hampered by his engagement to his cousin, he was out of sorts with himself and the world; and Valeria Grant's love seemed to his sick heart the only thing that could make him well and happy again. Why should he hesitate to secure it—to make her his own? In time some good fortune might "turn up", that would enable him to shake off Isabel, and marry her; in the meantime, she would wait for him patiently, and her love would be the charm that would make the waste desert of fashionable existence bloom and blossom like the rose. He was just in the mood to do something utterly foolish and perfectly desperate, and acting in the spirit of that wise old proverb: "'Tis as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb," no sooner did he find that his secret was in his cousin's keeping, than he wronged her still more deeply by offering Valeria a hand that was already pledged, and a heart that ought never to have been her own.

The same evil-spirit that tempts us to our desperate deeds, is generally kind enough to assist us in carrying them out in the easiest way. So, Mr. Monair had scarcely reached the Green Park before an idea of dazzling brilliancy entered his head. He hailed a cab upon the instant and drove off at a great pace toward his lodgings in Bond-street. His groom, a mounted sentinel of despair, was stationed be-

fore the door, with the horse which he had ordered at five, and forgotten! The young man could not help laughing heartily when he caught sight of the man's mutely-reproachful face.

"I entirely forgot you, Robert," he said, as he sprang out. "Get some one to hold the horses, and come up with me for a carpet-bag. Then you may take the horses back. I am going out of town for a few days, and shall not want you."

Cabby having volunteered to take charge of the spirited animals, Robert followed his master to his rooms, and assisted him in packing up a few changes of apparel. Stuffing the letters on the table into his breast-pocket, Mr. Monair then ran down stairs and jumped into the cab.

"Take good care of the horse, Robert," he said, "and tell Mrs. Jones I shall not be back for a week."

He was gone, and Master Robert stood looking after him, with his tongue in his cheek. Then he took out a little note-book, made a memorandum, mounted his horse, and rode off to the stable.

"Well, I'm blessed!" was all he deigned to say; but he had the number of the cab in his tablets, and before the next morning he intended to know more of this sudden escapade.

Little dreaming of his servant's determination, Mr. Monair drove gayly back to Brompton, and stopped before a house in Alfred Place, whose windows, as he had noticed that afternoon, bore the welcome announcement, "Apartments to let, furnished, for single gentlemen."

Our single gentleman was very easily suited, as you may imagine, and having deposited his carpet-bag in his bedroom, began to patrol the Fulham and Brompton roads once more, in hopes of seeing Valeria or her sister. Valeria did not make her appearance, but just at dusk he met Maria face to face in St. Michael's Place, and sent a message by her to his lady-love. I leave you to guess with what thankful joy that young person received it—how tenderly she looked at the flat roofs of the houses in Alfred Place that night before she said her prayers and went to sleep, and how Maria, elated at the important part she was playing in a real love affair, could not shut her eyes till long after the clock struck twelve, though the real heroine of the romance had been slumbering placidly by her side for more than three-quarters of an hour.

CHAPTER VI.

"—Only in my chamber,
Dare I thus boldly speak—
Alas! when he was present,
My words were sad and weak.

"For there were evil angels
Who quickly hushed my tongue,
And oh! such evil angels,
Kill many a heart when young."

—HEINRICH HEINE.

There was a grand party at Mrs. Monair's house in Half Moon street, Piccadilly. All the rich and the great friends of that lady had been invited, and most of them were present—for it was her last party that season—in a week's time she was going out of town. The carriages had been coming and going all the evening, but now the roll of wheels had ceased, and in its place you heard the soft note of the piano, or the throbbing pulses of the harp and the guitar. For it was a mixed assembly, and there were one or two famous "professionals" present, who condescended to bestow upon their entertainers, gratis, some of those liquid notes, for which the lessee of Her Majesty's and the Royal Italian Opera would have had the pleasure of paying in solid coin of the realm. Now and then, a solitary passer-by stopped beneath the windows, entranced, as a burst of ravishing harmony fell upon his ear, while the guests within, privileged to listen longer and more enjoyingly, gazed listlessly around, whispered to each other, or yawned behind their fans. The music bored them, poor things! for the penalty you pay for being fashionable is the loss of the faculty of enjoyment. If you turn night into day, and day into night—if you eat and drink everything that is sure to disagree with you,

and "take little or no exercise all the while—if you allow yourself, at the same time, to "look before and after, and pine for what is not"—to wish you were handsomer, or happier, or richer, or more fashionable—anything in short except what you are and must be—how can you expect to care for anything, to be pleased with anything, though it be the most delicious music, which the most delicious of tenors sings? In such a frame of mind, the melody of the heavenly choir itself would jar harshly upon your ear.

Miss Monair moved among her guests, perhaps as greatly bored as they were, but looking full of life and animation. Some of her dear young lady friends looked narrowly at her flushed cheeks and brilliant eyes, and smiled significantly as they whispered to each other something about a "hare's foot, my dear." But they were mistaken. There is no rouge that will paint a cheek half so becomingly as anger, and Miss Monair, for all her smiles, looks, and courteous ways, was in a terrible rage. Only that propriety and decorum forbade it, she would have liked to stand in the middle of that splendid drawing-room, and stamp, and shriek—perhaps swear. Only that ladies "in good society" do not usually do such things, she would have enjoyed tearing off the diamonds that flashed upon her neck and arms, and in her raven hair—would have liked to dance a jig upon them before her astonished guests, and afterward turn every one of those astonished guests, out of the house, by actual bodily force—neck and heels, out of the doors or the windows—as the case might be. And with all this tempest of rage, of hatred, and defiance seething and swelling in her breast, she was obliged to soften her tones, to temper her smiles, to caress, to flatter, to compliment, only letting her crimson cheeks and her flashing eyes tell the tale of some inward disturbance, which, she had, as yet, the power to control! She had never looked so beautiful in her life, and yet the young men who were attracted by her unusual brilliance, shrank from her when they came too near.

"She's too sharp—too glittering," said the melancholy Colonel Ross Edwards, to his young brother. "Don't you go near her, Charley. The woman is not safe. I'd as soon play with a tigress as meddle with her to-night. I wouldn't be in George Monair's shoes for some thing. I wonder if they have quarreled that he's not here to-night."

Other people wondered, too, as the evening wore on, and he did not make his appearance. Perhaps Miss Monair wondered as well, for she glanced now and then at the door with a sharp, anxious look, as if she expected some one. But no one came. No George—no Colonel, which was strangest of all.

One by one the guests took their departure, and went their several ways, and when the room was empty. Mrs. Monair looked at her daughter with pitying, yet fearful eyes.

"My dear Isabel, where can your uncle and George be?"

Poor lady! her heart was full of sorrow for her child. She would gladly have spoken some word of comfort had she dared. But Isabel was too proud by far to be pitied, and her voice was cold and steady, as she replied:

"Don't waste your time in thinking about them, mamma, but go to bed and sleep well. Good night!" and, with a kiss, she gave her her bedroom candle, and dismissed her.

The old lady went off very meekly indeed. She was dreadfully tired and sleepy, but Bell was so quiet; and, perhaps, George or the Colonel would call to-morrow, and then all would be well again. And so she trotted off to bed, and slept the sleep of the just.

But there was no sleep, just then, for Miss Monair; up and down the long room, she paced with knitted brows and clenched hands, muttering to herself:

"Jealousy is the devil! Where is he, and what is he doing? How dare he treat me so?"

Mind, dear reader, she did not love him, according to your gentler and purer notion of

love. She would not have given one of the hairs of her head for his good; and, generally speaking, she was happier out of his presence than in it. But she admired him for his fresh young beauty and his grace; he was her property; and the thought that any other woman had dared to win him from her, drove her wild with rage. Her pride was wounded, her self-conceit was touched, that was all. But wounded pride and hurt self-love, sometimes contrive to create a very little disturbance between them, I can assure you.

As she paced up and down like a caged tigress, a stylish, dressy, little French maid glided into the room, and stood contemplating her for a moment, with a smile, which it was quite as well, perhaps, her mistress did not see.

"You can go to bed, Rose. I shall not want you!" said Isabel, waving her hand, without looking up.

But the maid still lingered, explaining, in her pretty, broken English, that she was "desolated" to intrude upon mademoiselle, but there was a person waiting to see her.

"To see me? At this time of night!" said Isabel, looking up with a start.

"Yes; Monsieur's groom."

That was enough. Without another word, Isabel followed her to a little room, which she sometime used as a library and study. She called it a "den". There she found Robert, who saluted her with the profoundest respect.

"What can you want at this time of night?" she exclaimed. "Is your master ill?"

"No, Miss, not that I know of," was the reply. "I should have asked to see you earlier, only I did not like to let any one but Rose know that I was here."

"Quite right. And, now, what is it?"

"I thought I had better come and tell you at once, miss. My master has gone."

"Gone! Where?"

"He said he was going out of town, miss. But the truth is, he is at Brompton."

The blood rushed into Isabel's face.

"What is he doing there?"

"You'll excuse me for speaking of such a thing, Miss Monair," stammered the man; "but it may be, that you can put a stop to it before it is too late. There is a girl out there, a very pretty girl, and my master is mad about her. He has been out there three or four times this week; he has written to her, and now he has actually gone and taken lodgings in Alfred Place, so that he may be near her, and see her as often as he likes. And I saw him dancing with her at Cremorne last night!"

"Where is Alfred Place?"

"Just out of the Fulham Road, Miss. There is the number of the house. I got it from the cabman this morning."

He gave her a large card, with an address written on it, as he spoke.

"And this girl?" she said, without looking at it.

"If you will be kind enough to look at the other side of that card, Miss, you will see what her name is. Her father is a greengrocer!"

Miss Monair looked at the card. It was printed legibly and neatly. Yes; there was the hated name of "Grant", and there was a list of the things that odious creature helped to sell.

"Do you know anything about these people, these greengrocers, Robert?" she asked, at last.

"Not personally. I have made some inquiries in the neighborhood, though. They seem to be very well off, and very respectable."

"The girl and all?"

"Yes, Miss."

"We shall see—we shall see!" she murmured to herself, with an evil smile.

In her mind's eye, she was picturing poor Valeria months, or years after, fallen, degraded, a hunted outcast, even among those poor creatures who pace the dreary round of Regent street, or jest and laugh in that horrible Haymarket, as the unhallowed night goes by. The picture charmed her. She gloated over it with honest pleasure. But, in the meantime, till it became a reality, she hated Valeria Grant; and, for such a woman as Isabel Monair to hate

another, means something serious, my dear readers.

She glanced keenly at the man, who, having told his tale, stood waiting for her orders or his dismissal. He had betrayed the secrets of a kind master—so much the better. He might betray her also. No; she would take good care of that.

"Every man and every woman has a price," she thought to herself. "I will soon find out how much this man is worth."

She sent her maid to her own room for her purse, and having received it, took out a five-pound note, and placed it in his hand.

"You have served me well to-night," she said. "Watch your master during the next week for me. Let me know when he comes in and when he goes out—how often he sees that girl, and what he means to do with her, and you shall not find me an ungenerous employer. Now, good night, and thank you."

Robert made a low bow, and went away charmed with his good fortune, and with his mistress. Pausing a moment in the hall, to snatch a kiss from the coquettish Rose, he went straight out to Brompton, where, as good luck would have it, his new friend, the cabman, resided. He had already taken one room in the humble cottage, and one pound out of Miss Monair's five was bestowed upon the cabman for the information he had given, before the lucky groom went to sleep that night—or rather, that morning.

Robert in the Marlborough Road—Mr. Monair in Alfred Place—Valeria in the Fulham Road—that was the way in which the pieces were placed upon the chess-board at which Miss Monair presently intended to "make her game".

CHAPTER VII.

"But oh, the night is far too long,
And my heart bounds in my breast,
Fair water-fairies, come to me,
And sing my soul to rest."

"Oh! take my head upon your lap,
Take body and soul, I pray—
But sing me dead—careless me dead—
And kiss my life away!"

—HEINRICH HEINE.

It did not take long for our hero to ingratiate himself with Valeria's mother, and through her, with Cousin John. He was young, gay, and gallant; no one could help liking him—and the mother had a faith in his sincerity that was quite beautiful to see. Mr. Grant still remained ignorant worthy man!—of all that was going on under his very nose, but that mattered little. With mamma on their side, and Cousin John and Maria for companions in their walks and talks, how happy and how foolish those two young people were!

Was Valeria happy now that she had got her heart's desire—now that her lover was so near her, and so fond? Ah, no! There is often no course so heavy as a "granted prayer", and the girl's heart was ill at ease. She scarcely knew why. A thin but impalpable barrier separated her from George—she did not understand, still less could she remove it. It was nothing in his manner—never woman had a humbler slave than she possessed in him. In fact, he himself was not conscious of the existence of such a barrier, even when it was making her most unhappy.

The merest trifle in the world enlightened her as to its nature. She went early one August morning, with Maria, to Mitcham, to see an old friend of their mother's. The road from the station was a very pleasant one; it led by villa after villa, by gardens, hothouses, and conservatories, with whose floral contents Maria was so enraptured that it became a difficult matter, at times, to get her along. As they passed one of these places two gentlemen came out and walked down the road toward the station. Valeria glanced in at the open gate. The house was large and square, built of stone, with a porch, and a flight of broad steps ascending to it. The garden in front was handsomely laid out, and beyond the conservatory she caught a glimpse of a green lawn, shaded with trees, on which the drawing-room windows looked. Flowers in light wicker stands lined the entrance to this

pretty home—flowers bloomed in every window, with a luxuriant profusion that spoke more significantly than anything else could have done of the owner's wealth and taste. In the porch stood two young ladies, who had evidently come out to wish the gentlemen good-bye. One was an elegant girl of eighteen, dressed in light blue muslin—her companion, a little older, but evidently her sister, from the close resemblance they bore to each other, was fastening a flower in her curling hair. They were laughing and talking gayly, and took no notice of the humble foot-passenger who gazed upon them so earnestly for a moment, and then went on her way with a sick pang tugging at her heart. She knew now, only too well, what was the barrier between George Monair and herself—that instant's vision of the elegant house and its dainty inmates, had disclosed it to her. His fitting place was among people like them—people with whom she herself had nothing in common. He should have chosen a bride like that fair girl who wore the flower in her hair—he should not have stooped to one who only gathered flowers for sale. True—she was young and pretty, and could write and read, and repeat poetry, and draw a little, and play five or six tunes, passably, on the pianoforte, but what was this to the education, the accomplishments which these young ladies, and all others like them in England, had received?

Strange, is it not, what the possession, or the want of a little of what we heroically or philosophically call "dross", can do. Valeria went sadly on her way, feeling her dress shabby, her shoes dusty, and her whole appearance mean and unprepossessing in the extreme. Three or four carriages whirled past them. Maria looked coolly and critically at the horses and the servants, but Valeria shrank back upon the foot-path from the gaze of their occupants, feeling dimly in her own mind that she was out of place—or rather that there was no place in this world for her. The young, the rich, the great, and the beautiful, the world was meant for them alone, and she had better go and hide her head in ignominious obscurity, and trouble the sight of her fellow-creatures no more.

I am afraid you will think my heroine very weak, indeed. But she was endowed (since she had known George Monair) with that very troublesome virtue called humility. A virtue which is very well for saints, and helps them far, I have no doubt, on the road to Heaven. But, ah, me! It is much in the way of people who have to live in this world, and want to get on well in the eyes of others. It makes you shy, it makes you awkward, it sends you to the wall, when, perhaps, you are not the weakest; it makes you blush, and stammer, and appear like an utter fool, when you wish to make the best impression possible on another. Believe me, so far as worldly success is concerned, it is much better to have the front of the sunflower, than the shrinking delicacy of the wood-violet in its lowly dell.

And the consciousness of wealth, of influence, and of position, has far more to do with fronts of brass than we imagine. It is all very well, I suppose to cry down wealth, and to exalt poverty on high; but I cannot do it. I don't believe in poverty. Money, taken by itself, possibly may not make you happy; but, even to the most sorrowful wretch on earth, it brings a sovereign balm. Are you ill? Money will give you every attention, every comfort, every mitigation of your pain, that it is possible to devise. Are you unhappy? Money will help you to distract your mind, in a thousand pleasant ways, from the grief on which it is not good to dwell. Has your true-love deserted you? Money will buy you another quite as true. Are you old? Money will so pad, and paint, and powder, and regenerate you, that people will think you have discovered the Fountain of Eternal Youth, and kept its healing waters solely to yourself. Do you long for respect, for civility, for smiles from fair ladies, for greetings in the market-place? Money will buy them all. And it will give you, in addition, such a comfortable sense of your own dignity, your own cleverness, your own power of amusing, that it is really worth while

to be rich, merely to feel the pleasant sensation for an hour. Money! I have the firmest faith in it, in every way and shape if it be but fairly come by. Fill me this large but remarkably light purse of mine with coin of the realm and bank-notes, say to the tune of fifty thousand pounds, and see what a wondrous change you would work in the "me" of me. I should be afraid of no one, then. I should never dread unkind remarks or uncivil words. There would be no more shy shrinking back from the cold eyes of strangers—no more troubled misgivings as to the opinion my professional friends might hold of me. How clever I should imagine myself, how beautiful, how fascinating, seen in the reflected brilliancy of those fifty thousand golden charms! Ah, me! will no good fairy, no benevolent genie, fly hither from Thread-needle street, ascend to the roof of my office, come quietly down the chimney, and deposit that sum, in sooty canvas bags, at my feet? Strange things happened to Aladdin, who, I am very sure, never did in all his life one-half the hard work I have done in the last twenty-four weeks! Why should they not happen to me?

Or to Valeria! I wish, with all my heart, that I could make her rich and a duchess on the spot. But my story is a real and a true one, and I must relate things as they actually occurred—not as I, and perhaps you, would have them.

Valeria, then, went meekly on to pay her visit, and returned to Brompton just as the bells were beginning to ring for the evening prayers. George was eagerly waiting for her; and, in the simplicity of her heart, she thought she might follow up her usual custom, and asked him to accompany her to church. But, to her surprise, he burst out laughing in her face, at the mere idea of such a thing.

"To church, pretty one! Now, what on earth should you and I go to church for, this beautiful evening?"

Valeria managed to stammer out something about her mother liking her to go, and about Mr. Blank's being such an excellent preacher. But her lover was perverse, and pouted, and shrugged his shoulders, like a willful child.

"But do you never go to church, then?" she asked, with much surprise.

"Sometimes, on a rainy Sunday, when I am bored to death, and there is nothing else to do."

Valeria looked shocked.

"But I don't like it, even then," he continued, very candidly. "I don't know which bores me the most, now I come to think of it, sitting at home and counting the raindrops as they fall, or sitting at church to hear some man drone through his nose—"

"O George, don't."

"But, my pretty child, why don't they say something original while they are about it? I protest I have heard the same old tale over and over so often, that I am wearied to death with it. They preach to me about justification by faith, and baptismal regeneration, and all that sort of thing, and it bores me. I don't care for it. I go to sleep under their very noses, while they are talking. And then, to think that any one man is privileged to stand up in a pulpit and preach to, say, one hundred more, who dare not contradict him, or go out while he is talking, or ask him to stop. Oh no, Vallie, I don't like it at all, thank you!"

Valeria scarcely knew whether to laugh or cry at this outbreak. She had been so well brought up herself—such respect for the Church, and the ministers of the Church, had been instilled into her youthful mind—that to hear what George had been saying was almost as dreadful as if he had proposed undermining Buckingham Palace, and blowing the inhabitants thereof into small fragments. Probably, if any other human being had dared to utter such heterodox sentiments in her presence, she would have avoided them forever after as dangerous and designing persons; but it was "George" who spoke, and I suppose most of us have known at one time or another in our lives how very differently things sound from

George's lips, and from Henry's. So I am ashamed to say that Valeria forgot to reprove the culprit—nay, that she forgave him, and said very meekly.

"If you don't like church, George, where shall we go?"

He looked up at the sky.

"Let me see. The night will be fine, and we shall have a moon. The air is warm and dry. I'll tell you, Vallie—we'll go to Cremorne together, and you shall dance with me on the crystal platform."

"Confession or Cremorne, my lady?"

Do you remember that clever hit at Belgravia Follies in Punch, dear reader? Maria had seen the picture and laughed at it; but never thought how applicable it was to her own case, just then.

And so "my lady" chose to go to Cremorne. Of course she did! To her that place was a garden of magical delights. She knew every inch of the ground by heart. She was learned in the mysteries of the dog-show; had seen the wonderful "salamander" face to face, one day when he came unexpectedly into their shop to buy two pounds of the best potatoes, thereby proving that whatever else he might do, he ate his dinner, and enjoyed it like a sensible man. She knew the ballet-dancers, too, by sight, and before the advent of George the First, had secretly admired a magnificently-proportioned and very handsome acrobat, who threw somersaults with such marvelous rapidity, that it was the most difficult thing in the world to distinguish his head from his heels, or, indeed, to know if he had either head or heels at all. And as for dancing on the platform, had she not done it scores and scores of times with kind Cousin John for a partner, and her mother and father looking delightedly on, yet watching carefully all the while that their two girls took no harm, and that they left the gardens at a proper hour? The moment the last firework had fired and crackled in the air, Mrs. Grant gathered her brood under her wings and was off, much to Valeria's regret, who could not understand why half an hour more of such pleasure could possibly be wrong.

The girl, mind you, had not the slightest idea of what Cremorne at twelve o'clock was really like. She shrank from vice and evil so naturally and instinctively, that she escaped much knowledge of it. Maria, though much younger, was far better "posted" in the ways of this wicked world than her elder sister. She knew well enough (though she did not say so) why her mother scuttled away so rapidly, like an old hen, with her two chickens under her wings. The talk of the girls at her day-school had taught her that; and I am much afraid, if the truth was known, that Miss Maria had a great desire to stay—never imagining that, with Cousin John at hand, she could possibly come to grief—never thinking of the injury that might be done to a young and innocent mind by the spectacle to be witnessed there. And, after all, what was it over which she pondered so curiously and so often? Vice that would be pleasure if it could—but it never can! No human being, endowed with reason and conscience, ever yet could point to the memory of an evil hour, and say "There and then I was really happy!"

It was excitement, it was intoxication, it was madness, but never happiness; for the good alone are happy. And those brilliant gardens, with their moonlit avenues, and the crystal platform echoing the tread of flying feet, what are they when honesty and virtue depart, and vice and immorality take their place? It is the dance of death they dance beneath those burning lights, and the hearts of the merry-makers are full of misery and despair.

Ah, fair Valeria, it is well for you that you are kept by a kind mother's care from all such "pleasure" as this!

On this eventful night, the ballet, and the circus, and the show, passed unheeded before the girl, and the handsome acrobat might have broken his neck in twenty places, if he had liked. She never would have seen him. She was thinking only and always of George, and of the waltz he had promised her up on the crystal

platform. And when it came—when she took her place just before the band, and felt his arm steal round her waist, and his hand press hers, while the passionate melancholy of Weber's last waltz throbbed out upon the moonlit air, and they whirled away—ah, me, how sweet it was!—what an elysium of bliss—how gladly she would have seized that happy moment, and lived in it for ever! Moonlight and music, a beloved partner and a waltz in the open air! The pen drops from my hand, and I see a verdant grove in a land beyond the sea, a little brook that sparkles like silver beneath the moon, a group of gay girls and young men dancing to the music of three violins and a flute. And they play Beethoven's "Spirit Waltz"; and as we float around, almost as silent as spirits ourselves for the instant, under the wondrous charm of the music, a warm hand clasps my own, and dear blue eyes smile into mine, and a curl of golden hair, stirred by the gentle night-wind, just brushes my cheeks. And I close my eyes and sigh for the beautiful past which can never return to me again; for the blue eyes closed forever; for the graceful, golden head laid low beneath the shadow of those very trees where we danced so lightly upon that summer night! Strange memories these, to be roused from their long sleep by a vision of the dancers at Cremorne!

It is but a dream; but George Monair, as he waltzed that evening, became suddenly conscious of a very disagreeable reality. It took the shape and form of his groom, Robert, who stood at a little distance among the spectators, watching him and his pretty partner, with a disagreeable smile upon his face!

CHAPTER IX.

One day passed by. Then Robert came again, was admitted privately to Isabel's presence by Rosalie, and this time he brought information that made her decide speedily upon her course of action.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the Colonel all this time, and Mrs. Monair was getting alarmed at his absence and silence. So, in the place of sending a servant down to his lodgings to inquire for him, Isabel volunteered to go, and set out, just after luncheon, in the carriage, accompanied by the discreet Rosalie.

The Colonel's own man met them at the door, and then, for the first time, Isabel learned that her uncle had been really ill—too ill even to send for, or to see her. The news came with a sort of shock to her. Having always seen him in the height of health and spirits, it had never occurred to her that anything could ail him. And these slight changes sometimes suggest the thought of a greater, terrible one—death. Isabel did not care to dwell upon such a gloomy idea very long.

Adams showed them up into the drawing-room, and went to finish his master's toilet, in which he had been interrupted by their arrival. Isabel took up a book and began to read. Miss Rosalie, from her seat in the corner, examined the room and its furniture with a critical eye. There was none of the disorder usually visible in a gentleman's apartments to be seen there. I remember dining once with a party of friends at a bachelor's house in New York, where the chief ornament of the writing-table was a heterogeneous collection of broken pipes, odd spurs, and fragments of cigars; and where I covered myself with frightful confusion by attempting to draw back a curtain in the ante-room (which, as I thought, hid a window whence I could watch the rising moon), and thereby bringing down a perfect avalanche of boots and slippers, which had been cunningly stowed away there that very day by my host and his little foot-page, "to give the ladies more room". But you might have dined at the Colonel's every day in the year, and no such accident would have happened to you. Every chair had its place, and kept it; the whist-table, and the sofa, and the pianoforte had stood in their respective corners ever since Isabel had first visited the room, a little, red-cheeked, laughing child in pinafores and trowsers. To

tell the truth, this perfect neatness was a sore trial to the young lady. Her own room, but for the heroic exertions of Rosalie, would have borne a strong resemblance to Chaos. She had not the slightest faculty for using a thing and putting it back in its place again. Away it went, in the first corner that happened to look convenient, till Rosalie came by, with her light touch and skillful management, to set everything to rights again.

"If Mademoiselle only resembled Monsieur the Colonel in this one point," thought poor Rosalie to herself, as she glanced around, "how much more time I should have to myself each day!"

The next moment she rose from her seat, courtesied respectfully, and glided into the hall, for Monsieur the Colonel was coming in through the folding-doors. Isabel rose, threw down her book, and offered her cheek to her uncle, saying as she did so:

"How could you be so ill and never send for me?"

"It was a mere nothing, Bell—a bad cold and slight fever; that was all. It was not worth while bringing my pretty niece down here to see me wrapped up in blankets like an old mummy, and coughing, sneezing, and dosing myself with gruel from morning till night."

"Your pretty young niece would have been very glad to come and take care of you, if that was all, my dear uncle," she said, very softly, for something in his aspect touched her wonderfully.

He had not been dangerously ill, and yet he looked so changed—so aged. There was a little trembling of the hand, a feeble look about the still handsome face, that made her feel instinctively disposed to pet and make the most of him while he remained with her. Yet all the while she did not lose sight of the object which had brought her there.

"Has George been to see you?" she asked.

"Not he! I caught this cold riding after him out to Putney that day, the ungrateful young dog, and he has never been near me since. What is he about?"

"Oh, he is out of town, Uncle Alfred."

"With the Grays?"

"No!"

"Gone abroad, eh?"

"No!"

"Where the dooce is he, then?"

"Not very far away. His out-of-town excursion will make you laugh, I am sure. He has lodgings at Brompton, near his Dulcinea of the potato-shop."

The Colonel looked utterly aghast.

"Bell, you don't mean it!"

"I do, indeed."

"Did he tell you this?"

"Oh dear, no—you could not expect such refreshing simplicity from a young gentleman like him."

"How did you find it out then?"

"Through Robert, his groom, who is now really in my service, though ostensibly in his."

"Is Robert with him at Brompton?"

"Not with him, but still at Brompton. He lodges with a cabman, near Mr. Monair's present house, watches his proceedings, and reports them all to me. 'Tis enough to make one die with laughter when you come to think of it. There is not a movement of his that I do not understand fully, and all the while the young simpleton believes his secret to be so cleverly kept."

The Colonel did not join in her mirth. Evidently he thought it no laughing matter.

"Pray how does this wretched boy spend his time?" he asked.

"In the most pastoral manner imaginable, my dear uncle. He rises early, breakfasts, goes shopping, that is to say, he buys cherries and green-gages of his lady-love. Then he dines, and then he walks out with her."

"Alone?"

"Oh no. Everything is managed with the most delightful propriety. There is a younger sister, a school-girl of fourteen, and a great, overgrown young man, a cousin who always go with them, and they walk up and down

Sloane street, or look at the boats from Cheyne Walk, or sentimentalize along the King's Road, in a manner most edifying to see. Even the butcher-boys respect such true affection, and refrain from saluting them in the streets. Then, when they have a scientific fit on, they go to the Kensington Museum, and at night they go to Cremorne!"

"Go where!" ejaculated the Colonel.

"To Cremorne. But don't be shocked. They retire discreetly after the fireworks are over, and the green-groceress, who is in the secret, generally plays the part of *chaperone* there."

"Oh, good gracious me!" exclaimed the Colonel, trotting up and down the room in dire distress. "Why does that boy make such an ass of himself? Why, I shall be congratulated the next time I go to my club, on the prospect of a niece who will bring vegetables into the family at a most reasonable price, or something of the kind. I must go and see the boy at once, and put a stop to this nonsense. I should have gone a week ago, if it had not been for this abominable cold."

Isabel listened with a quiet smile, playing an opera-air with a paper-cutter on the book she held. He stopped suddenly in his hurried walk, and looked searchingly into her face.

"And I can't make you out either, Bell. You tell me that you are jealous, and yet you seem so cool about the matter; and you laugh when you talk about his dangling after that girl, as if it was the funniest thing in the world!"

"And so it is," she answered, composedly.

"Well, I'm dooced glad you see it in that light!"

"Where is the use of fretting myself about it!" she said, lightly. "Let it pass. Are you well enough to go out, uncle?"

"Yes, my dear."

"The carriage is at the door. I will take you down. I want you to go somewhere with me."

They went down-stairs arm-in-arm.

CHAPTER IX.

"Thy fatal shafts unerring move,
I bow before thine altar, Love!
I feel thy soft, resistless flame
Glide swift through all my vital frame."

"For, while I gaze, my bosom glows,
My blood in tides impetuous flows,
Hope, fear, and joy alternate roll,
And floods of transport 'whelm my soul."

—F. SCHUBERT.

Rosalie having returned home, the Colonel and his niece had the carriage entirely to themselves. She talked, it is true, but only of the Park, the opera, the last balls of the season, and her approaching Continental trip. The Colonel's mind was set at rest for a time, and at last he ventured to ask where they were going.

"To Kew," she replied.

"To the Gardens?"

"Yes."

"And what is going on there to-day, my dear?"

"Something that you and I ought to see," she replied, with a slight smile. "George is there."

The Colonel began to sit uneasily on the soft cushions of the carriage.

"Hem! Any one with him, my dear?"

"Oh, yes!"

"The young person, I suppose?"

"Exactly. His Princess of Potato-parings. She is with him."

"But, my dear, don't you think it will be rather unpleasant?"

"On the contrary. It will be very amusing, I should say; and I want something to make me laugh."

"But, suppose this young person takes it into her head to get up a scene?"

"Let her."

"Consider the publicity of the thing, my dear Bell."

"You are right. But she will get up no scene. She is one of those ethereal creatures, I am told, who never know what it is to get

into a good sound rage—who can only cry a little, and perhaps faint becomingly now and then, if any one is near enough to catch them."

"But what good will it do, Bell, to come upon them in this very unexpected way?"

She burst into a hard, bitter laugh.

"Would you have me send the creature a sealed and perfumed note, appointing an interview with her to-day? No, uncle, there is nothing on this earth like taking people by surprise. You find out so many things, then, that would otherwise have been a secret to you for ever."

"Dooed unpleasant things, too, sometimes," muttered the Colonel.

"Well, I would rather know unpleasant things, uncle, than live to be duped, deceived, made a fool of!" she answered, bitterly.

The old man was silent. In his heart he loved this haughty, headstrong girl. He loved her better, perhaps, since she had shown him how she suffered, than he had ever done before. But he knew no more how to manage her than I should know how to tame a royal Bengal tiger let loose here in my study. And his sensations were, perhaps, much such as mine would be nuring my forced *tête-à-tête* with the kingly beast. That a storm was brewing, he could not fail to see, but when, and where, and how, or on whose devoted head it would break, he had not the power to say. He dreaded the meeting at Kew, and even tried, dangerous as her mood seemed to be, to persuade her to return again without accomplishing her object. A ludicrous vision of a collision between the greengrocer's daughter and his haughty niece haunted him. He pictured Valeria to himself as a buxom, handsome hoyden, who, at the first appearance of impertinence on the part of her rival, would take to fisticuffs as a matter of course. He groaned inwardly at the thought of such a vulgar assault. The phraseology of the ring mixed itself, in his bewildered mind, with her soft accents, till at last he stammered out, in answer to a remark of hers about a carriage they passed:

"Bell, if she strikes you, don't hit her back again!"

Miss Monair looked at her uncle with utter astonishment, and then burst out laughing.

"My dear uncle, you must be talking in your sleep. We are not going to settle our little difficulty—this lady of the onions and I—as Heenan and Tom Sayers might settle theirs."

"No," said the Colonel, somewhat ashamed of having thought aloud so ridiculously; "but you never know what such people may say or do. If she is a vulgar, impertinent sort of girl, she will certainly insult you, and I know you will never bear it. Do come away, Bell, like a good child, while there is yet time."

She laughed and patted his extended hand with a playful gesture.

"Uncle, you mistake me. I am not going to resort to brute force as a means of alleviating my grievances, nor will she. I am very passive in the matter. If George likes her better than me, how can I help it? I can prevent his marrying her, it may be—at least I mean to try—for the rest, that which is to happen must happen; and since I cannot alter it, why should I grieve? As you say so often, uncle, it is all 'on the cards', and I must take what is given me like any other mortal, and do the best I can. Talk about free will, of liberty of action, of making life what we choose it to be!" she cried out, with sudden scorn. "You know as well as I do, that such a doctrine is but a mockery and a lie! We are slaves, blind slaves, mere puppets in the hands of an all-powerful Something, who will and must be Supreme, fume, and fret, and struggle as we may."

The Colonel looked rather perplexed. Graceless old sinner though he was himself, he had a sort of dim notion that the nature of a woman, simply because it was a woman's, ought by right, to be higher, and better, and purer than his own. It was the great universal lesson of faith which every boy learns, or ought to learn, at his mother's knee. And those who have so learnt it, find it most difficult, if not utterly impossible, to put aside in after years that child-

like belief in woman's goodness, no matter how often a woman may have deceived, betrayed, wronged, and ruined them during those years. So the Colonel, though his experiences of the sex had not been of the best and brightest kind, still crowned his ideal woman with the halo that had shone around his good mother's head, and for her sake believed in this young descendant of hers, in a way that would have made Bell smile could she have guessed it. He had no more idea of the depth of possible wickedness lying dormant in that young girl's heart, than I of the secrets of the Maelstrom whose whirling waters I have never yet seen. Bell, he thought, was young and giddy, and high-spirited and wild; and George had not behaved well to her, and the knowledge of this stung and angered her. But she was good at heart, and when she was once happily married, all would go well. And so, when he heard her talking in that wild sort of way, he felt it his duty to make a little gentle remonstrance.

"My dear child," he said, softly, "you should not say such things. If any one else had heard you, they would have set you down directly as something very like an infidel."

Bell opened her black eyes widely at this unexpected exhortation.

"As for what you say about an all-powerful Something," he continued, elated at his success in inculcating precepts in morality, "that is all very well, if one knew what you meant by it."

"Fate, Uncle. Nothing less. Nothing more."

"Then you ought not to speak in that way."

"Hem! Saul is among the prophets once more, Uncle Alfred! The idea of your setting yourself up as a parson! I should not be at all surprised, now, when I go home, to find my lady-mother enacting the part of clown or pantaloon!"

"Bell, I am ashamed of you!"

"Well, so am I ashamed of you, uncle, when you talk in that fashion. The idea of your scolding me for believing in Fate, when you taught me to do so! Why, that sentence of yours, 'It is on the cards', was almost the first one I learned to speak! And, now—O Uncle Alfred, how can you expect me to preserve a sober face, when you talk such utter nonsense! When you have owned, time after time, that nothing ever turned out in this world as you had hoped, and expected, and intended it would—when you have acknowledged honestly that not the 'best laid', but that every 'plan of mice and man gang aft a glee'—when you know so well that one may work and toil their lives out for any given end in vain, if that end is not to be accomplished! You have proved this; so have I, and now I am proving it again. My whole life is going wrong—my whole future hangs now upon its last turning-point. Do you think I would not make that point a bright one if I could? I cannot, you cannot, no one can do it for me, or tell me how it will all end. But the way is fixed, and in time I shall find myself walking there, though I may hate it all the while. No tears, no prayers of mine can alter it; smiles or sighs will avail the one as much as the other, and smiles are pleasanter than sighs, and so I choose them. Knowing all this, seeing yourself how much depends upon the events of the next few months, feeling what a crisis this is in my existence, do you not see at the same time how utterly powerless I am—how utterly unable to bring the happy or unhappy future within my grasp? If George loved me— if he would marry and be true to me, I feel that I might yet be a good and happy woman. Can any exercise of my own will influence his—can any effort of mine draw him one inch nearer to me, or enable me to free myself from the influence for good or evil he has always had over me? You know better. I can do nothing, unless I go blindly and impulsively on as I am doing now. I cannot make him dislike that woman and be constant to me. I cannot make myself a good, forgiving creature who would place her hand in his and say, 'Be happy, and never mind me.' I look back upon my past life, and see a dreary blank. I look forward into the future, and know and feel that there I shall be ten

times weaker and wickeder than I am now. Yet I cannot help it; I cannot turn away from the sin and misery I see before me. I was born wicked, and I suppose I shall die so. 'Tis my kismet, and I must accept it. Wicked, restless, desperate, unhappy, and lost, that is it! Allah, il Allah! Who can help it?—not I."

She sat looking at him when she had finished speaking, beautiful, defiant, and unhappy. Among all the nonsense she had uttered, there was a grain of truth and sense, and he knew it. Her inheritance from her ancestors had been beauty, grace, and a heart and soul of the most chaotic kind. Her passions were strong, her nature rash, despotic, and reckless. If she had been a boy, she would have run away and gone to sea, most probably, and hard work and strict discipline would have improved that nature considerably. But she had been an only daughter—an only child—a beauty, and an heiress—the queen of the nursery—the idol of a weak and indulgent mother—and finally, the passionate, headstrong, unreasonable, undisciplined creature she was now. It was difficult to say what her future would be; but as she talked on, showing her uncle, for the first time in her life, a glimpse of her unquiet heart, the poor man grew sorely alarmed, and imagined her even worse than she really was. If she had but met with a kind, considerate, truly religious adviser at that moment, how different, her after-life might have been! Half the evil doing in this world arises from the fact that evil-doers have been left to themselves at the most critical period of their lives, without the warning word, the guiding hand that might have prevented the mischief and the crime. So in this case. Isabel—poor, unhappy, wayward girl—wanted nothing so much as a grave, wise friend and counselor then. Was it some mute hope that she might find one in her uncle, which impelled her to such a passionate outbreak of hopeless unbelief and despair? Perhaps so, for she sat watching him eagerly, while he shrank from her eye, feeling abashed, uneasy, and ashamed. She was going wrong, that was evident enough; but what could he say to her? If he talked of God instead of Fate, she might laugh in his face, and with very good reason. Besides, what he did he know of religion, that he should name it to her?

And so, for that feeling of miserable, self-shame—for that dread of a scornful laugh, he let the decisive moment pass by, and thus, perhaps, a soul was lost forever. What do you think he said in reply to that outburst of hers? Only this:

"My dear Bell, you must not excite yourself so. We will bring George back and marry you off, and then all will be right."

She turned white, uttered a sort of groan, and turned away, with a wild, reproachful look at him that haunted him to his dying day. A moment after, she looked up again, smiling and self-possessed as usual.

They drove across the bridge at Kew, and drew up before the hospitable door of the Rose and Crown.

"We will get out here," said Isabel. "It is just possible that Strephon may be feasting Delia with curds and cream in the dining-room here."

"No; she was wrong. They looked through the dining-room, the tea-room, and into every wooden arbor in the grounds in vain. There were plenty of people there, some of whom paused in their meal, as Isabel's stern, piercing gaze rested upon them, to express a polite hope that the young lady would know them again when she saw them—but there was no curds and cream, there was no Strephon, no Delia in the place. So they walked up into the garden slowly, arm-in-arm, and began their search there.

The Colonel limped along in bitterness of spirit. His week's illness had broken him down more than he knew, and he was in positive bodily fear, of a collision—personal, or otherwise—with the greengrocer's daughter.

"Bell!" he said, piteously, "there is yet time to give up this wild-goose-chase. It can

do you no earthly good to meet them here. I will see George myself and set it right, if you will only—"

"Too late, uncle!" said Isabel, suddenly stopping, and speaking in a suppressed voice, while she pointed to a group just before them. "Look there!"

The Colonel did look—uttered his usual exclamation of "The dooce!" and then stood utterly aghast and helpless.

For he saw, not more than six feet away from him, a rustic bench, placed beneath the shadow of a grand old tree, whose branches spreading to the right and the left, and drooping almost to the ground, formed a pleasant screen from every passer-by. Upon that bench sat a young girl, dressed in light summer attire, whose delicate beauty would have attracted the Colonel's favorable regards wherever he might have happened to meet her. Beside her—bending over her—talking to her only as a favored and accepted lover would talk, sat George Monair, blissfully unconscious, as he gazed into those dark blue eyes, of the pair of black ones that were regarding him so wrathfully at a little distance. Not far away, Maria roamed to and fro, looking curiously at the visitors, the most faithful yet at the same time the most delightfully neglected of warders.

Five minutes passed, and still the enamored pair were utterly unconscious of any presence save their own. The Colonel began to fear that he had made some dreadful blunder.

"I think we had better go," he whispered to his niece. "George is a scamp, that is true, and I will give him a sound lecture to-night. But that young lady cannot be—"

"Don't alarm yourself, uncle," said Isabel, aloud. "That young lady, as you call her, is the greengrocer's daughter, and there is no mistake."

At the sound of her voice, the lovers started and looked up. George crimsoned to the roots of his hair, and sprang from his seat. Valeria's eyes were fixed upon the lady whose fell glance at her expressed such a depth of loathing and of hatred. Who could she be? and what did she want there?

There was an instant's awkward silence. Then Mr. Monair advanced hesitatingly toward them.

"Well, Sir!" said Isabel, coldly.

But the Colonel stammered, and shook his cane at him.

"What do you mean by such conduct as this, Sir?" he exclaimed. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Call yourself a gentleman and a man of honor, and then do things of this sort? I insist upon your taking leave of that young person at once, and returning with us."

George burst out with a very naughty word. "Swearing before a lady! What next, Sir—what next?"

"You drive me to it," said the young man, sulkily. "What does this interference mean?"

"That is a cool question, Sir—a remarkably cool question, considering all the circumstances of the case. If Isabel avoided you studiously for a week or ten days, and then you found her sitting in Kew Gardens with a young gentleman's arm around her waist, I think you would like to know the reason of such extraordinary conduct, wouldn't you—hey?"

George gnawed his glove, and said nothing.

"Now, Sir," thundered the Colonel, "are you coming with us or not?"

"I am not coming."

"You are going back to that young person?"

"I am going to that young person," replied George, who was too much excited to care what he was saying. "And I recommend you to speak a little more respectfully about her; for, in a very few weeks, she will be my wife."

"Your what, Sir?" gasped the Colonel. "Good heavens! Do I live to hear a nephew of mine say such a thing? To offer such an insult to your own cousin—to your affianced wife—and before my face! You must be mad, Sir! Isabel, my dear, this is no place for you; let me take you to the carriage; and I will see him again, and find out what this extraordinary conduct means."

Isabel did not answer. She was still looking at Valeria, who sat breathless and frightened, fixed by that baleful glance as if by the charms of a deadly serpent. When she did open her lips, it was to some purpose, I can promise you; for fine ladies are only flesh and blood, after all, and the most perfect breeding in the world cannot always restrain the natural outbreaks of rage, and hate, and jealousy. So Isabel exclaimed to her rival, as she passed:

"You simpering, painted thing! I'll spoil those pretty eyes and pink cheeks before I have done with you! You thought to take him from me—did you? See if you can do it, that is all!"

It was not lady-like—it was not well-bred—it was not nice in her to do it—but it was human; and I am sorry to say that she felt ten degrees better for the spiteful speech when she left the gardens, got into her carriage, and drove away. And I scarcely think the Colonel was sorry she had uttered it, either. His sympathies were all with her just at that moment; and although the greengrocer's daughter had unexpectedly turned out to be a very elegant and pretty girl, it still did him good to think she had received something like her deserts at the hands of his niece.

"You're a trump, Isabel!" he said, as they drove away. "I was afraid you would faint, or do something of that kind, when you saw them."

"Faint!—with that creature before me!" she said, turning her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes upon him. "Uncle, since you like this little amusement so well, you shall go out to Brompton with me to-morrow evening, and see the play played out."

"You are never going there, Bell?"

"Wait and see. When you find yourself among the potatoes, and onions, and cabbages, Uncle, you will begin to understand what it is that I mean to do by way of finishing Master George's little romance," she answered, with a quiet laugh.

CHAPTER X.

Just imagine, my dear young lady friends, what a situation I have placed our poor little Valeria in. To go to Kew Gardens with the beloved of your heart, to sit under the shadow of whispering, green trees, listening to the accents that fall more softly than any others on your ear, to be thinking, and feeling, and knowing what a happy place this grave, old world is, after all—when youth, and love, and pleasure combine to make it so—and then to have the blissful reality, and no less blissful reverie, broken in upon by an unmistakable rival, who is, perhaps, far above you in rank and position, if not in grace and beauty, and who turns up her aristocratic nose at you and your belongings with a scorn that you can but writhe under, bitterly though you may resent it. Surely, this must be a very unpleasant ending to a pleasant day!

Poor Valeria found it so, as she sat on the garden-seat, long after the haughty lady had gone, wiping the tears from her beautiful blue eyes, and glancing furtively, now and then, at Mr. Monair, who paced up and down the gravelled path with a lowering brow, and an air so sullen that she dared not speak to him. Maria, recalled from her enthusiastic contemplation of the ladies' dresses and bonnets, by the threat that fell from Isabel's lips at the conclusion of that strange momentary interview, sat with her arms around her sister's neck trying to comfort her, and wondering, in her own mind, why Mr. Monair did not come to assist her in her task.

"A nasty stuck-up thing she was, Vallie!" she exclaimed. "Don't spoil your eyes over her, my dear. You are ten times prettier than ever she was or will be. And I should just like to see her meddle with you again while I am near you, that's all! I'll tell her and that horrid old man just what I think of them the next time they dare to come bothering you, Vallie, dear—see if I don't."

"Hush, Maria—George is coming."

And the poor girl dried her eyes, and put her faithful ally's arms away that she might hear

what her lover deigned to communicate to her about the scene she had just witnessed.

"I am very sorry you should be so annoyed, my dear," he said, in a constrained voice. "I think we had better go back to Brompton now. Will you take my arm?"

"But—George," she said, hesitatingly, "who were they? and why did that lady speak to me like that?"

"Oh, hang it! Don't ask questions, Vallie, just now."

She was silenced at once.

But Maria, grown suddenly watchful for her idolized sister, was not so easily to be put down.

"You ought to tell Vallie all about it. Mr. Monair," she said, resolutely; "because I am very sure my mother will not let her go out again with you, if people are going to come and say such things as that lady said to her."

"Little girls should be seen and not heard. Miss Maria," was the sarcastic reply.

"Little girl, indeed! I'm no more a little girl now than you are, Mr. Monair! I'm going into long frocks next birthday; and I love Vallie," she added, stoutly; "and I'm not going to stand by and see any one insult her, if I can help it! I shall tell my mother all about that lady when we get home."

"Little mischief making monkey! I will never forgive you if you do. If you must know all about it, the lady was my cousin, and the 'horrid old man,' as you so politely called him, was my uncle."

"Well, he was a horrid old man, and I hate him, and so does Vallie! But what business had your cousin to speak so to her?"

"You had better go and ask her," said the young man, lightly.

But something in Maria's round young face showed that she did not mean to be trifled with; and Vallie, also, was looking very pale and unhappy. So, after considering a moment, he made up his mind that nothing but a good round falsehood could possibly save his credit and his lady-love, and prepared to make it sound as much like the truth as he possibly could.

"The fact is," he said, with an air of extreme candor, "my cousin is jealous of you, Vallie!"

Valeria's heart sank heavily down.

"Jealous! Why, you have not been making love to her, have you?" asked the downright Maria, looking very fierce at the mere idea of such a thing.

Mr. Monair winced slightly, but replied the next moment, with a look of injured innocence, that he had never thought of such a thing.

"Then why on earth should she be jealous of Vallie?"

"My dear Maria, although you are going into long frocks next birthday, it is just possible that there are some things connected with the passion of love which you may not fully understand," he answered, in a tone that showed he was very nearly at the end of his patience. "Valeria is better fitted to enter into a discussion of that kind than you are, I'm sure. She can see how my cousin may be jealous of her, even if I have never given her a right to feel so."

Valeria raised her eyes sadly to his.

"Yes. I understand it, George, only too well. But there is nothing between you—she has no claims upon you—you are not engaged to her?"

"What a question."

"But answer it, please. I cannot doubt your word, you know; and it would ease the pain here"—and she laid her hand upon her heart—"to know that I have more right to you than she has."

Poor child! If she wanted to know all, why was she so beautiful, so gentle, so winning?—why did she look in his face with those tender, violet eyes? If she had but been awkward and ugly, he would have told the truth with cheerful alacrity, and all would have been well. But because she had a fair skin, and soft, dark hair, and a pretty mouth, and lovely eyes, he found it utterly impossible to do anything better than add another to the long list of fibs (that is the

polite way, I believe, of describing a lie, now-a-days) he had already told her.

"My dear Vallie," he said, earnestly. "I assure you there is nothing between us—never has been, and never will be! Are you satisfied now, or do you want me to go down on my knees and swear to what I have said?"

"No, George. Your word is quite sufficient," she answered, with a look of trusting confidence that made him heartily ashamed of himself. "And I am really sorry for your cousin. It must be very hard to love you and meet with no return."

"Sorry!" burst out Maria, spitefully tossing her head. "I am sure it serves her quite right for abusing you so! And why she wants to do it, I can't say. Catch me caring for any man who was not fond of me! A woman must be mad to make such a goose of herself."

Mr. Monair started impatiently from his seat. He could hardly say which galled him the most, the kind or the impertinent speech. Isabel, his proud, beautiful cousin, alternately pitied and condemned—and by whom? The daughters of a greengrocer! The blood of the Monairs rose hotly in his cheek at the unwelcome thought.

"Come, Valeria," he said, coldly; "we must really go; it is getting late."

Quick to observe the slightest shadow of a change in his manner, she followed him without a word. The journey back in the crowded steamer to Cadogan Pier was performed almost in silence. When they landed, he put the girls in a cab; and, excusing himself from accompanying them on the plea of an engagement, walked away toward Battersea Park, by way of soothing his ruffled feelings with an hour or two of utter solitude in the free, fresh air.

"I don't like that young gentleman's proceedings just at present," observed Maria, as they drove toward home. "I shall keep my eye on him, Vallie—do you hear?"

Valeria did not answer. Tears were in her eyes, and a heavy cloud seemed hovering in her life's blue sky. That first uncertain doubt which succeeds our perfect trust in a beloved one—oh, how hard it is to bear!

CHAPTER XI.

"All is lost—save honor!" cried the defeated king in olden times, as he gathered up his bridle-reins and rode away from the battle-field, which had been fatal to so many of his gallant knights, and very nearly fatal to him.

"All is lost—honor and all!" echoed Isabel Monair, as she drove toward Brompton, on the eventful morning which was to decide her fate and Valeria's—ay, and her cousin's too! "All is lost—honor and all!"

She knew that she was about to do a cruel—perhaps a wicked thing. For the sake of jealous pride, still more for the sake of an establishment in life which she did not really need, she was going to crush two hearts, and make two lives forever miserable. True, her cousin had wronged—had slighted—had scorned her. But she did not love him; it was her pride, not her heart, that was wounded; and she might, had she been magnanimous enough, have made him a better as well as a happier man; by releasing him from the chains he hated, forgiving him his crime of dishonesty and double-dealing, and leaving him at peace with the woman he really loved, and whose first fresh affections he had been lucky enough to win. She might, I say, have done this, and all his life long George Monair would have blessed her for her charity and kindness, and through that life he would have endeavored to deserve it by his fidelity to the wife he had chosen.

But Isabel was no angel, to set herself aside and put her rival in the better place so meekly. Indignant with Valeria for daring to be loved, angry with George for his treachery, she was also eager for her own interests, bent on her own advancement all the while. If she had ever really loved her cousin, his conduct must have killed that love; as it was, it simply made her despise him. She still held him bound to her, but chiefly because it was her interest so to do. Only by marriage could she gain the position

which she coveted, and the greater liberty of speech, thought, and action, denied to her by the customs of her country as a single woman. And since no other came to woo, she must hold fast by the one already there—must bind him to her chariot-wheels till the ring was on her finger, and her end was won. "Then," she said, with a slight smile, as they drove down Piccadilly, "then let him go where he likes—do all he likes; it will be all the same to me!"

"All is lost—honor and all!" Yes, she might well say that. Circumstances were bitterly against her just then, and the passion of wounded feeling in her haughty heart forbade that patience which would have taught a meeker woman to wait till circumstances grew kind once more. Isabel rebelled, warred against, and, in her heart, refused to be conquered by them, even while she confessed with her lips the utter necessity of submission to their untoward march. While she struggled so desperately with herself and with her fate, she stood upon the brink of a deep and dark abyss, and looking down into its depths, with half-fascinated eyes, she saw her future image, repeating, with melancholy despair, "Yes, all is lost—honor and all!" She knew only too well what was coming—what must come, if she forced herself as a wife upon a man who loved another woman better than her.

And yet she went straight and swift on to her doom. The Colonel had promised to meet her at Brompton, and when the carriage had turned down by the "Bell and Horns", she saw his stiff military figure far up the Fulham Road, pacing up and down like a sentinel on guard. As the carriage drew up beside him, he looked at Isabel with a scared, guilty face. The truth was, that he had gone out to Brompton directly after breakfast that morning—had visited his nephew's lodgings, in order to warn him of the approaching interview between Isabel and Valeria. But no Mr. Monair was to be found. He had risen at six that morning, the landlady said, gone off without any breakfast, and left no message as to the time of his return; so there was nothing for the poor Colonel to do but to pace up and down the street, with the vague hope of running across him before Isabel arrived.

Of this unsuccessful mission he took great care to say nothing, as he handed her from the carriage, and ordered the coachman to return to the "Bell and Horns", till he was wanted.

"Well, uncle," said the young lady, briskly, as she took his arm. "Have you paid your respects to our dulcinea yet?"

"No," said the poor Colonel, who would far rather have headed the assault upon the Redan. "Tis an ugly business, Bell—make the best of it. And so unusual, too!"

"I like doing unusual things."

"Poor little thing!" sighed the Colonel.

"Is it me you mean, my dear uncle?"

"No, Bell. I was thinking of the poor girl yonder. How little she dreams what is coming upon her! Upon my honor, I pity her!"

"No doubt," said Isabel, quietly; "she is pretty—and beauty in distress is so interesting, especially to a man. If she had a coffee-colored skin, green eyes, and a hump, you would be saying, 'Little wretch! it serves her right!' Here we are, uncle, in the actual presence of your divinity. You can take off your hat, and go down on your knees before her as soon as you like."

She gave him a little push as she spoke, and sent him into the shop, while she stood smiling upon the threshold, a destroying angel—beautiful to behold, but in reality as cruel as the grave!

Valeria stood behind the counter arranging the shelves and the window for the day's sale. Piles of fruit and vegetables were around her; a basket of velvet-cheeked peaches was in her hand; and, smiling to herself, while she softly sang a little song, she removed two of the largest and finest, and placed them carefully on one side, hidden by a wreath of grape leaves. The colonel sighed as he saw her do it. So young—so fresh—so fair in her little print morning dress, and white collar and sleeve—it seemed a sin and a shame to come and disturb the inno-

cent peace and confidence that had just prompted that graceful little act. But Miss Monair had no such scruple to contend with. She watched the transfer of the tempting fruit with a sarcastic smile, and then said quietly—"For George, I suppose, young woman!"

At the sound of that clear, ringing, slightly metallic voice—that dreaded, that unforgettable voice—Valeria turned swiftly, as if an arrow had struck her. The pitying face of the Colonel, the cruel eyes of her rival, met her astonished and terrified gaze. She dropped the basket of fruit with a low cry, sank down upon a seat, and covered her face with her hands.

Isabel advanced to the counter, and looked at her from head to foot.

"You expected a visitor, perhaps, not visitors," she said. "Let me see. A blue dress; Mr. Monair's favorite color is blue, and it suits your complexion admirably, I must say. Linen collar and sleeves; he likes that refreshing simplicity and neatness of attire, I know. Black kid slippers and white stockings, I dare say, if I could but see your feet; and your hair done in braids, not in a net—oh! no; nets are out of fashion, and he likes the fashion, whatever it may be! And you have a ring, too," she added, catching a glimpse of Valeria's hand; "a forget-me-not ring. He gave it you, and we all know what that means."

She paused for a reply, but none came, nor did Valeria raise her head, though a deep red flush suffused her cheeks and neck. That blush seemed to sting Isabel with a sudden fury.

"Will you stand up, creature?" she exclaimed. "Stand up, and show us that face which has tempted George Monair to sell his honor—to break his word! Come, here is my uncle; an older man, but by far the better catch of the two. Be kind, and look at him, and see if you cannot make an impression on his heart—it would be worth your while."

"Bell, don't be too hard on her," said the Colonel, under his breath. Just then Valeria raised her head.

"Why do you come here and talk to me like this?" she said, with gentle dignity. "This is my father's house—my home; and you are a lady, and ought not to insult a poor girl who is beneath you—who never wronged you willingly—who—"

Her voice faltered. Miss Monair laughed aloud.

"So you attempt to teach me courtesy, do you? Well, perhaps you are right after all. I must not forget that I am a Monair, even while I remember that I am a woman. And so, Miss Grant, as we are in your father's house—your home, may I ask you to favor me with half an hour's conversation in a place more private than this?"

She looked around at the unfortunate beets and cabbages with a glance that made Valeria feel herself mean and small indeed.

But although that shop was evidently no place for a private interview, the young girl did not move from her seat. To tell the truth, she was so puzzled and perplexed by Isabel's sudden request, that she scarcely knew what she was doing. Her mother was in the kitchen, busy with the affairs of the house. Maria was in the parlor, preparing her lessons for school; their one servant was up-stairs engaged in making beds, or in looking out of the window, as the case might be; her father was on his daily rounds, and Cousin John had gone into Thurloe Square with a basket of peculiarly nice fruit for an old invalid dowager, who gobbled up an enormous quantity of their goods, and then grumbled most fearfully when she had to pay for them. The whole responsibility of the shop rested, therefore, just at that moment with poor Valeria, who had a dim idea through all her bewilderment that business must be attended to before anything else—that potatoes must be sold though hearts might ache—that cabbages would command the market price even though hearts were breaking. She meekly intimated as much to Isabel, though not exactly in the same words. That young lady smiled scornfully, bowed her head, and still kept her place. Valeria, looking sadly up at her, remembered another who had

once stood before that counter, bright and beautiful as the opening day. Ah me! how things were changed! how she was changed since then! And the pretty head drooped, and the violet eyes were softer still with unshed tears, as she went down to the other end of the shop to attend to an impatient customer. When she returned, Isabel began the attack again.

"Can you name any time when you would be more at leisure, Miss Grant?" she said, in her most dulcet tones. "We could easily look in again."

"Oh no; here is Cousin John!" said Valeria, as she caught sight of a well-known figure strolling down the street. "He will attend to shop, and I am at your service."

Cousin John came in whistling, stopped abruptly at the sight of Isabel, took off his hat, and slipped behind the counter, with a meek look that would have made Valeria laugh, but for the trouble she was in. The young man took them for some very grand customers, and thought to himself that "Grant & Co. were looking up." Valeria explained to him her transactions of the morning, shoved him the slate, and gave an order or two touching the disposal of certain baskets of vegetables behind the counter, Isabel watching her all the while from under her drooping lashes, with a scornful smile.

"She never loved him," she thought. "She cares more about those baskets of peas and cucumbers than she does for George Monair, and she will console herself with them when I have taken him from her. It would be a pity to spoil such an excellent woman of business."

So she hushed the vague stirrings of her conscience, never dreaming that the gentle nature of the girl she despised was far superior to her own, never thinking that it might be a meek fulfillment of a daily duty, a service of love to kind parents, rather than an undue interest in cabbage and potatoes, that she was condemning.

With her hand upon the shop-door, Valeria hesitated for an instant. Had Miss Monair been alone, she would have taken her up in her own bedroom, haughty and unmerciful as she looked. But it would never do to escort the Colonel into that modest little chamber, and he evidently intended to accompany his niece wherever she might go. So, with much disquietude—for it was like approaching a lighted candle close to a barrel of gunpowder—she led them into the little parlor where Maria was learning her lessons.

Where she was supposed to be learning them, I should say; for, at the moment of their unexpected entrance, that young lady was endeavoring, with the aid of two chairs placed far apart, and weighted with books to keep them steady; a short rope, that looked suspiciously like a missing clothes line Valeria had heard her mother inquiring for only the day before; and the long-handled hearth-broom, to imitate feats which she had seen performed at Cremorne and elsewhere during the summer. At sight of the strangers, and sound of her sister's horrified "Maria!", the young acrobat leaped lightly to the ground, the two chairs coming together the next instant with a great crash, that brought Mrs. Grant up from the kitchen to see what was the matter.

"My clothes-line! Oh, you naughty, wicked girl!" were the first words she said, as her astonished eyes took in the scene; and then, as she became aware of the presence of strangers—such stylish strangers, too—she grew embarrassed and voluble, and crimson to the ears, in one and the same moment.

"I am sure I hope you will excuse me, my lady," she said to Isabel. "I was so taken aback at what that wicked child had done, that I never heard you at first. That girl is the plague of my life, my lady. She hates playing the piano and learning French, and she is always up to something of this kind. I declare, it is enough to make one discouraged, that it is! I know what will be the end of it all some fine day; she will break her neck, and then she will be sorry enough she did not mind her mother. My best clothes-line, too! Just look at it, my lady."

As she held up the unfortunate bit of rope, all knotted, tangled, and cut, Isabel could not help laughing.

"Never mind, Mrs. Grant," she said. "I, the young lady's tastes lie so decidedly in that direction, you can make a rope-dancer of her, if the worst comes to the worst."

"And it would serve her right my lady," replied the worthy woman, who had mistaken Isabel for a titled customer of theirs, and never dreamed that her suggestion was anything more than a threat over the recreant Maria's head. Had she known that Isabel in her own heart believed it the highest and most honorable position her young daughter could possibly hope to aspire to, I firmly believe she would have boxed her ears soundly then and there, and turned her out of her house, without deigning to listen to any apology or excuse she might think fit to offer. But it is such a wise provision that we cannot read each other's thoughts! My dearest friend probably thinks me an unbearable bore, and I believe her, in my heart of hearts to be an utter simpleton; yet see how well my dearest friend and I get on together, how glad we are to meet, how sorry we are to part! Bless me! What life would be worth a moment's purchase if it had to be spent in that horrible Palace of Truth, where it was utterly impossible for any one to tell one of those merciful little white fibs that now make us endurable to each other! What a palace of envy, and hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness that must have been! I could not well afford to live in it, my dear readers. Could you?

And so good Mrs. Grant, little dreaming that she was welcoming her daughter's direst enemy to her hearth and home, rolled up the clothes-line, disengaged the two chairs from their burden, and offered the one to Isabel, the other to the Colonel. Miss Monair sat down at once—she wished to play out the comedy completely at her ease. The Colonel had some Arab-like scruples about accepting the hospitality of those whom he was about to insult and injure; but a slight twinge in his foot, and a direful vision of flying gout, were stronger than those scruples, and he took the proffered seat with the air of a martyr. Valeria stood silently near her mother's chair; Maria, with her books, retreated sulkily to a corner, whence she watched the intruders with suspicious eyes. Child though she was, she felt certain that they were, to use her own expressive phrase, "after no good", and she grew doubly watchful for her sister's sake, after she got one glimpse of her downcast, sorrowful face.

There they sat, in the pleasant, simply furnished parlor, with the autumn sun shining in warmly through the open window, and the birds chirping and singing in the small garden just beneath. If, through the glass door of the shop, you had caught a momentary glimpse of the group, you would have fancied that the Golden Age had really come at last; you would have said to yourself that here were wealth and luxury sitting amiably to be entertained by virtue and competence. The Golden Age, indeed! It was the present one instead—the Age of Iron and of Brass! And it was Pride, and Hate, and Revenge, who had come to pay a morning visit to Beauty, Youth, and Innocence, that was all.

The strange silence that had fallen upon them lasted so long, that Mrs. Grant's kind motherly heart took alarm at last. She looked up in her daughter's pale face, then glanced at Isabel, whose pitiless eyes were also resting there, then at the Colonel, who turned red and fidgeted uneasily as he met her gaze; something was evidently wrong. The good soul saw it dimly. But what could it be? and what could that proud young lady have against her Vallie, that she should watch her so?

"Perhaps I have mistaken you for some one else," she said to Isabel. "I called you 'My lady', for I thought—"

"You thought quite wrong, Madam," was the curt reply. "I bear no title at present; I am simply Miss Monair."

"Monair!"

"The cousin of Mr. George Monair. And this gentleman is his uncle—Colonel Monair."

"Oh! my prophetic soul! My uncle!"

What malicious spirit whispered that quotation into Valeria's ear? I cannot say. I only know that, even in her sorrow, an odd vision flashed across her mind, and she saw the boards of a well-known theatre over the water; saw a fifteenth-rate actor swaggering over the stage and mouthing out those words, while she sat in the pit with Maria and her cousin John, and laughed, in spite of herself, at the burlesque he was making of his part. Only for a moment the memory lasted, and then she was back again in the little sunny parlor, face to face with her future sorrow, and feeling as if she should never laugh again.

Poor Mrs. Grant sat utterly aghast. Had these grand relations come to treat with her for the hand of her daughter, or were they about to forbid the match?

"Having learned that Mr. Monair was in the habit of visiting here," Isabel went on, "we have called to ask you a few questions, which, no doubt, you will be perfectly willing to answer."

"Oh yes; certainly," murmured Mrs. Grant, turning very red.

"Have you known Mr. Monair long?"

"Not very long. Above a month, I should say. Isn't it, Vallie?"

Valeria, who had every day of that happy time indelibly impressed upon the tablets of her memory, and could have told to an hour, a minute, and a second, when and where she first saw him, answered faintly that she believed it was a month.

"And during that time he has been pretty regular in his visits here?"

"Very regular, Miss. He comes every day of his life—sometimes two or three times a day."

"Exactly," replied Isabel, blandly. "And in the evening. Your daughter sometimes walks out with him in the evening, does she not?"

"She does, Miss."

"And goes to Cremorne, I believe?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Grant, rather sulkily. "She has been with him there."

"And danced with him?"

"I dare say she did. People often dance together when they go there. Is there any harm in that, Miss?"

"Not the slightest."

"My daughter never set her foot out of the house with Mr. Monair alone, if that is what you mean. Her sister and her cousin have always been with her."

"I have no doubt, Madam, that your daughter is the very personification of prudence and propriety," said Isabel, with a wicked smile. "I had no doubt of it, even when I met her at Kew Gardens with Mr. Monair, yesterday afternoon, alone—"

"Oh! what a story!" burst out the indignant Maria. "I was with her every moment of the time, mother. Wasn't I, Vallie?"

Vallie simply bent her head. These concealed sneers, these half-implied hints and taunts, might anger her mother and her sister—they had no power to wound her. There was something far, far worse behind them; she knew it, and was waiting for that alone!

Mrs. Grant's patience, never of the longest or strongest, gave way as she heard the accusation and the prompt contradiction.

"If I thought Maria had left her sister, I assure you I would box her ears soundly," she exclaimed. "But she says she did not, and I believe her. As for the rest, Miss, pray why should not my daughter go to Kew with Mr. Monair as well as you? I dare be sworn you had some gentleman with you. There was no harm in the one nor in the other, that I can see. You were probably engaged to him. And my Vallie is engaged to Mr. Monair."

She fired that last shot point blank into the enemy's camp, with a look of triumph that said, "Now, find fault if you dare, and do your worst. I defy you!" But Isabel only raised her eyebrows slightly, and passed her handkerchief across her lips, to hide the smile that, in spite

of her, trembled and flickered in her deep dark eyes.

"I was at Kew Gardens with a gentleman, it is true," she observed; "but I was not engaged to him. I was with my uncle. And so Miss Grant is really betrothed to Mr. Monair?"

"He has asked her to marry him as fair as any man could," replied the mother, proudly. "And she has promised. There is the sign—Vallie, my girl, don't be frightened, but show your ring."

She held up her daughter's hand as she spoke, and pointed to the little cluster of forget-me-nots. Isabel leaned forward to examine it with a critical air.

"Turquoise," she said, calmly; "and worth, I should say, taking the chasing and setting into consideration, as much as three pounds ten. But if she should sell it, Mrs. Grant, the brokers would never give her more than thirty shillings."

"Sell it! What on earth should she do that for, pray?"

"'Tis just as she likes. She may attach more value to it than I should in her case."

"I don't understand you, Miss," faltered Mrs. Grant, who began to grow bewildered with Isabel's mocking manner. "Can you tell me, sir, what she means?" she added, turning directly upon the Colonel, who was watching the combat with wonder, and likened his niece in his own mind to a velvet-footed cat, and poor Mrs. Grant to the hapless mouse, who, after two or three more taps from those soft paws, would find the sharp talons buried in her quivering flesh. Taken all aback by the mouse's sudden appeal to him, he spoiled Isabel's fun in an instant by blurting out the truth.

"She means, Mrs. Grant, that the ring is of no value—that it means nothing. In fact, Madam, my nephew is a scamp, and deserves I don't know what, for misleading your daughter. He has been engaged to my niece ever since he was a mere boy, and he can no more marry your daughter than I can, nor half so well," added the gallant Colonel, bestowing a kind glance upon the pale beauty before him; "for I at least am a free man, and that is more than he can say for himself."

But the pale beauty paid no heed to the Colonel's glances; she only heard his cruel words. She leaned eagerly forward, her hand upon her aching heart.

"Sir, I am only a poor ignorant girl," she said, with a sort of sob in her voice. "I know I am not worthy of him; but oh! I love him so! You would not deceive me, I think. Upon your honor as a gentleman, is this story true?"

"Quite true, my poor child."

"He is still engaged to her?"

"He is."

"And he told me with his own lips that there had never been anything between them!"

"So he did. I heard him say so myself," added Maria. "Somebody has told a lie, that is certain."

It was a downright, perhaps an offensive, way of stating the case, but the Colonel forgave it, for he was sorry for them all.

"I have not lied!" he said, simply. "I have said nothing but the truth. He has been promised to Isabel almost from his cradle, and they were to have been married at the end of the season. Young men will often misstate things, you know, my dear, when they are led away by a face as pretty and a heart as kind as your sister's."

Isabel's lip curled at this compliment, which proved that her uncle was, like all other men, ready to defend the cause of a pretty woman above all others. But Maria drew nearer to him, liked him for the kind way in which he spoke, and quite forgot that she had ever called him "a horrid old man".

Valeria bore the tidings much better than Miss Monair had expected. She still stood beside the easy chair, half encircled by the protecting arm of that mother whose kind heart was bleeding for her wrongs.

"Cheer up, Vallie!" she was saying in her gentlest tone. "Don't you fret for him, my pretty one!"

"O mother, he told me a lie!"

"'Tis the way of the world, my poor child!" said the Colonel. "Men often do so."

"Other men may," said Valeria, looking up at him proudly; "but George—O George!"

She gave a great gasp, and hid her face upon her mother's shoulder. Miserable though she was, she would not break down—she would not cry before that cold, proud woman, who would only sit there and smile to see her weep! And so with one or two heavy sobs, she conquered herself for the time, and lifted her face again with a look that went to the Colonel's heart, and brought a sensation into his throat as if he was choking. Isabel looked on quietly. There is nothing on earth so cruel as a woman can be to a hated and successful rival—and for every sob that shook that slight frame, for every pang wrung from that gentle heart, Isabel counted a moment of joy. Had there been a stake and a lighted pile in the sunshiny back garden, and had the power to condemn and torture been hers, she would have conducted Valeria thither with her own fair hands, would have roasted her alive, and sung an opera-tune to drown her dying shrieks. Was she so very wicked and unwomanly after all? Analyze your own sensations, fair slighted beauty, the next time Adolphus deserts your side to hang enraptured over the lovely Julia's chair, and then judge Isabel as best you can. You know (if you are a woman of spirit, and honest with yourself), you know quite well that at the precise moment you could see Julia grilled with the most perfect satisfaction. Within the next quarter of an hour you may possibly forgive her in your own heart, and go to the piano and sing a duet with her while Adolphus listens and looks on—but for that one moment you devoted her to the flames. Be honest, and own it, now!

Maria, hanging about her sister, and petting and caressing her in her deep distress, was suddenly struck with a very bright idea. She would have scorned to speak to Miss Monair, but she looked up at the Colonel, and said very simply:

"Valeria finds it very hard to believe this, Sir; so do I, and so does my mother. May I ask Mr. Monair before you both? I will run and fetch him, and then all will be settled at once. He cannot deny it here, if it is true."

The Colonel coughed, and looked dubiously at his niece. But the child's proposal seemed to tickle her fancy immensely.

"Thank you for your implied doubt of our honesty," she said affably; "and by all means go and bring Mr. Monair to join us. It will be such a charming family party; I shall await your return with the greatest impatience. Pray, fly for him as if you had wings."

"There is no need," said Maria, looking rather scared. "He is coming."

Sure enough, they heard a frank cheery voice outside in the shop, saying, "A fine morning, Cousin John—enough to do one's heart good, is it not?" And then the door opened, and gay, handsome, and smiling, George Monair stood among them.

CHAPTER XII.

"Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow."

The wildest land

Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do,
And what I dream, include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees, within my eyes, the tears of two."

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

The hardest sinner, the most glib maker of excuses, might well be staggered and abashed at such an unexpected meeting. Mr. Monair turned white, and stared at Isabel a moment, then sadly hung his head before them. The poor wretch felt that all was known—that all was lost—and he had just sense enough yet remaining to teach him not to injure his cause further in Valeria's eyes by pretending ignorance of the cause of their arrival. That tacit confession of guilt, though it destroyed every lingering hope within her heart, touched that heart deeply still. She could not bear to see him—her

fairy prince—standing there penitent and ashamed, while the piercing eyes of the woman who wished to marry but did not love him watched him coldly. Maria could not bear it either. All her sympathies had been on her sister's side till he appeared; but he looked so downcast, so wretched, so utterly unlike her gay and handsome friend, that, regardless of her mother's frown and shake of the head, she stole around beside him, and slid her small hand into his. The young man grasped it as a drowning wretch clings to an oar, looked at her with tearful eyes, and murmuring, "Good little thing—kind little friend!" bent down and kissed her.

"Maria, come away," said Mrs. Grant; but Maria rebelled entirely. She shook her head, and caressed Mr. Monair's hand with her own. I think Valeria never loved her little sister half so well as when she proved so unexpected and so staunch an ally to the lover disgraced before her very eyes.

Mr. Monair looked round the room with a heavy sigh. Never again could he sit there of a pleasant autumn morning hindering Valeria in her work, or playing at childish games with Maria and her young brothers. Never again could he smoke a pipe with Cousin John and Mr. Grant, in the shop outside, listening all the while between the pauses of the conversation for the sound of a sweeter voice within. It was all over—that pleasant dream. He had been able to make it last, he might have been a good and a happy man. Tied up to yonder woman, he shuddered to think what his daily life must be. Vice must form his only pleasure, every wicked excitement must be brought to aid him, or he should go mad at once. And the end would be—ah! he knew too well the lost and degraded wretch he should infallibly become—a wretch, upon whom the pure eyes of Valeria never ought to look. There is virtue, and virtue in the world, you see. And the one can stand serenely alone, looking only to God for its strength and its reward. But the other needs fostering, and encouraging, and propping up with the purest earthly aids. Mr. Monair's goodness was of this latter kind, he knew it only too well. And now that the prop and support were so violently wrenched away, where could poor virtue go?

All these looks, words, and thoughts, which it has taken me so long to describe in my own clumsy way, were over within two minutes of the young man's appearance, and Maria had no sooner come to his side with mute encouragement, than Mrs. Grant assailed him.

"You don't seem surprised, Mr. Monair, to find your uncle and your cousin here?"

Poor George glanced at his uncle, whose face was almost as rueful as his own.

"I am certainly surprised, Mrs. Grant."

"And what do you think your uncle has been telling us about you?"

"My uncle!"

There was a sort of "*et tu, Brute!*" tone in his voice that made the Colonel wince.

"I could not help it, Gregory, my boy," he said, with a deprecating look. "The truth had to come out. Isabel was determined it should."

"I am very much obliged to Isabel, and shall never forget this kind office of hers," said Mr. Monair, looking at her with his blue eyes full of angry light.

She tossed her head and smiled.

"Why, surely, George, you did not expect me to let this farce go on till I had lost my husband, and this young lady had gained him!"

"I expected nothing from you, Isabel, that was kind, magnanimous, or great."

"Thanks for the compliment. If you wish me to deserve all those grand epithets, you must set me a better example. Have you been so very great and magnanimous during the last month, that you can afford to sneer at me?"

He looked at Valeria, his pale Valeria, with a heavy heart.

"I have been a rascal and a traitor to the sweetest, loveliest woman on earth, if that is what you mean."

"To me?" she asked, with an innocent look.

"Does the description suit you?"

"Some people might possibly say so."

"I should not make one of their number. No; there is the heart I have wounded—there is the heart that loved me," and he pointed to Valeria, who raised her eyes and looked at him, with a rosy blush just tinging her cheek.

"Well, opinions differ," said Isabel, lightly. "I should have said that you had behaved like a traitor to some one else as well: but I suppose you know best."

"Yes, Mr. Monair, the lady is quite right," broke in Mrs. Grant, whose kind heart began to bleed for him, thus warning her that the interview had best be brought to a close. "You have wronged my Vallie, but you have wronged your cousin more. You knew her first, and loved her first."

"I never loved her!"

"Tut! tut! you are angry now, and scarcely know what you are saying. But she has the best right to you, and you ought to go with her, and behave honorable after all this."

"And Vallie!" said the unhappy young man. "Oh! what will Vallie do?"

"We will take care of her."

"And you will make her hate me."

Tears struggled up to the kind old eyes, in which he sought his doom so eagerly.

"No, Mr. George, I suppose I ought to do that, but I haven't the heart. We shall always think of you kindly out here, for though it was all very wrong, you have been so pleasant and so kind, that—oh! George! George! why did you come?"

If Isabel had not been there, George would have flung himself at the kind creature's feet and wept with her. But those cold eyes were ever on him; he felt their influence, though he did not meet their glance. And so he only hung his head again, and pressed Maria closer to his side.

"Can you ever forgive me, Mrs. Grant?" he asked humbly. "I loved her so, that I would have risked my life for her; and, as sure as there is a God in heaven, I meant to marry her."

"Yes, I believe that; I don't think you ever had a thought of wrong toward the poor girl. And so we all forgive you, Vallie and all; don't we, Vallie?"

But the girl could not speak. Pale as death, she leaned upon her mother's chair, drawing the forget-me-not ring from her finger. Mrs. Grant saw it and wiped her eyes.

"That is quite right, my child. There, George, you must take back your ring."

Valeria held it out without a word. He stepped forward to take it, and their eyes met. Between the tearful eyes and the trembling hands, the little toy fell to the floor. With a sudden impulse of fury he set his foot upon it, and when Maria sprang forward to rescue it, it was broken in fifty pieces. With all the instinct of the future woman strong within her, the girl preserved those fragments carefully, and gave them to her sister that night. Do you want to know what Valeria did with them? She purchased a little gold locket, hid them therein, and wore them on her heart, to her dying day, in memory of the vanished light and beauty and fragrance of her "love's young dream!"

Miss Monair, who had been watching this latter scene very patiently, now rose to go. The Colonel rose also, and turning to Mrs. Grant, shook her warmly by the hand.

"You will forgive us, I am sure, Madam, for the very disagreeable errand on which we have visited you. And you, my pretty child, will you forgive us too?"

Valeria uttered a faint "Yes."

The Colonel's heart was moved at the sight of so much patient suffering. He bent down and kissed her forehead.

"God bless you, my child!" he said, softly.

"An old man's kiss and an old man's blessing can do you no harm in the heavy trial before you."

"God bless you, uncle!" cried out poor George, whose heart was ready to break at this recognition of Valeria's goodness from the head of his house. "You never did a kinder thing in your life, or one that made me love you better."

The old man looked at the young one with a

sad and tender smile. Was it just possible that he, too, had loved, and lost his love? Was this the reason of his kindness to his nephew and Valeria?

"Come, Isabel," he said, gently, "Say 'good morning', and we will go. It is quite hard enough upon the poor boy in any case; let him say 'good-bye' to her alone."

"Oh! pray don't let us interfere between them," she said, with a hard laugh. "Good-morning, all. George, when your leave takings are over, you will find us at the carriage at the door."

They were gone at last. He turned to Mrs. Grant with such a look of utter misery that her heart was melted by it.

"I have been a coward and a villain," he said, bitterly; but you see my excuse in her. Can you wonder that when I saw your daughter I was ready to risk anything and everything to win her.

"If you had broken with that lady first, you might have had her, George."

"It is not too late," he cried out, vaguely.

But Valeria's soft voice threw that hope to the ground.

"It's too late, George. Even if you were free, I could not marry you now. For you told me an untruth. I could never trust you—never believe you again."

"O Valeria, will you never forgive that?"

"I forgive; but we part now, and we must never meet any more."

"You never loved me—you cannot care for me. I see it all now!" he cried, flinging out of the room in a rage.

Both Maria and Valeria ran after him into the hall.

"O George! not like this—not like this!" the poor girl cried; and he came back from the open street-door and flung his arms around her.

All was forgotten—all was forgiven in that one fond kiss, while Maria stood by, crying as if her heart would break.

"Now go; we part friends—dear friends. Now go, and God guard and bless you!" said Valeria, freeing herself from that close embrace. "I shall never forget you, George."

Forget him! All the fire of his nature was in the look he gave her. She understood it too well, and crying out in sudden alarm, "Oh, you must go, George—she has a right to you", she drew back into the parlor with Maria, and shut the door. What it cost her to do that he did not know, he never will know!

He ran out to the carriage, looking like a madman.

The Colonel grasped his hand as he stood by the door, and forced him in.

"Home!" said Isabel; and leaned back upon her cushions smiling with closed eyes.

The long, exciting chase was over, and the day was hers!

CHAPTER XIII.

"He listened at the porch that day,
To hear the wheel go on and on,
And then it stopped—ran back away—
While through the door he brought the sun.
And now my spinning all is done!"

"He sat beside me with an oath
That love ne'er ended, once begun;
I smiled, believing for us both
What was the truth for only one.
And now my spinning all is done!"

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

All stratagems, they say, are fair in love or war; but I am afraid our hero's tactics looked paltry and pitiful enough to him, when he reviewed them by the light of a racking headache in his old lodgings the next day. Had they been successful, he might have gloried in them, but beaten, disgraced and humiliated as he was he could only toss wretchedly to and fro upon his unsteady pillow, and groan—ay, and weep—as the events of the last month passed in rapid succession through his mind. The success or failure of a project stamps its character in our own eyes sometimes as in the world's; and Mr. Monair, being discouraged as well as defeated, took a most unfavorable view of his little campaign, and came to the conclusion that, while it lasted, he had behaved more like an idiot than

like a young man who had "seen the world", and learned how to appropriate its good gifts with the greatest amount of pleasure and benefit to himself.

He thought of Valeria—of her beautiful face, her winning ways, and her gentle, loving heart. He thought of their many happy hours, of their long and pleasant excursions, of their boating-parties on the river, their trips to Kew, to Cremorne, to Hampton Court. All over! The sun had shone more brightly, the little birds had sung more sweetly, the sky had been bluer, the grass greener, and the flowers fairer for the gentle presence at his side. Now, sun, and sky, and flowers, and the song of birds, were shadowed by a horrible cloud of doubt, and estrangement, and misery. Never again could he be so good, so happy, and so pure, as he had been during that one brief month!

Who had worked this change? Isabel! He ground his teeth savagely as he thought of her, and if wishes had power in them (which, luckily for us, they have not), I am afraid that young lady would not have been eating her breakfast and reading a French novel in Halfmoon-street quite so comfortably at that very moment. If one might judge from the good turn she had done him, their married life promised to be anything but a serene and happy one.

He rose at last, and having dressed and breakfasted, rang the bell, and ordered his horse. In a quarter of an hour it was at the door, and Robert, who had also returned from his suburban trip, was in attendance, stolid and immutable as a liveried sphynx. His master hesitated an instant when he saw him, then muttering to himself, "After all, what does it matter? What does anything matter now?" he mounted and rode away, followed at a respectful distance by the groom.

Every one was "out of town". That is to say, all the fashionable people who could afford it had gone into the country or upon the continent, and those who could not, were living in the back rooms of their houses, with the blinds drawn down in front and the shutters decorously closed. The squares were empty and deserted. Rotten Row looked utterly forlorn, and the drive was silent as a tomb. Even the sunshine seemed to have gone out of town with the butterflies, for the sky was gray and leaden, and the air raw and cold, with a slight suspicion of fog in its chillness. There was not one of Mr. Monair's aristocratic acquaintances to observe or quiz him as he trotted slowly along Piccadilly, with his head bent down, and his eyes fixed sadly upon his horse's mane. The crossing-sweeper looked after and envied him as he passed; the butcher-boys and errand lads wondered within themselves: "Whatever could make that 'ere swell look so down on his luck?"—when the luck was evidently of the best and brightest kind. A prancing horse, good clothes, a gold watch, and a groom in livery. What more could "the swell" want, in the name of all that was sensible? So they judged him, little thinking how heavy his heart was lying in his breast; how gladly he would have resigned everything for which they envied him, could he but gain one treasure which could never more be his!

They passed Halfmoon street.

"Now, surely he is not going after that girl again!" said Robert, with a grin, as he rode behind.

But he was! Straight through Knightsbridge he rode, and stopped before the "Bunch of Grapes", near St. Michael's place.

"You will wait here for me," he said, walking away at a great pace toward the "Bell and Horns".

Robert watched him till he turned the corner, then shrugging his shoulders, he dismounted, and, leaving his horses in charge of a cabman waiting for a fare, went in to taste the beer of the "Grapes".

"Shall I meet Valeria? O star of love! shine now, and guide me to Valeria!" thought our hero, as he hurried along the old familiar road. It was a peculiarly appropriate invocation, when you come to consider that it was about eleven, A. M., and that a dim, red sun was vainly trying to pierce the foggy, cloudy sky. But he was to be pardoned for thus continuing

times, seasons, and heavenly bodies, since he was in love. That any one, when that peculiar form of lunacy seizes hold of them, should even remember that there are such things as suns and stars in the world that holds their beloved one, is a matter of mystery and wonder to me!

Neither stars nor sun were propitious to Mr. Monair; that day, for, though he paced up and down the pavement in front of the greengrocer's shop for nearly half an hour, no Valeria came forth. Mr. Grant was serving his customers within, too busy even to cast an eye toward the street, and see the unwelcome visitor loitering there. Cousin John had evidently gone on the morning round. And Valeria—oh! where was she?

Driven desperate at last, Mr. Monair took a sudden and bold resolution. He knew where Maria's school was situated, and walking straight up to the door, he rang a peal which frightened the maid-servant half out of her wits, and bade her say that "Miss Grant was wanted instantly at home". The message had the desired effect. In five minutes Maria came rushing down three stairs at a time, dropping all her books on the hall-floor, when she saw who had sent for her.

"Oh! what is it?" she asked, breathlessly. "What is the matter? Is Valeria worse?"

"Worse!" he gasped, turning white. "What do you mean? I don't know! Pick up your books, give me your satchel, and I will talk to you when we get into the street."

She obeyed in silence. When the round-eyed, inquisitive servant had locked the garden-gate upon them, he caught her hand, and asked, piteously:

"What did you mean just now, Maria? Is she ill?"

"Well, not very ill, George. But she fainted this morning at breakfast, and mother made her go to bed. When I saw you, I thought she must be worse, and that they had sent for you."

"Fainted at breakfast! My blessed darling! O Maria, what does she say of me?"

"I have never heard her mention your name, George, since you went away yesterday."

"What did she do?"

"After you had gone?"

"Yes. Did she cry?"

"Not that I know of. She went up to her own room at once, and did not come down again. Mother and father were both with her in the evening, but I don't know what they said to her, for I had to sleep in another room last night. And this morning she fainted away at the table. Mother says she must go into the country at once."

"Where—where is she going?"

"I can't tell you."

"O my good little Maria, don't be unkind to me when I am so unhappy, but tell me where she is going."

"No. My mother would not like—Vallie would not like it—I should not like it, either," replied the shrewd little thing. "You see, George, it is all over, and you ought not to follow her about any more. I heard my mother say last night that it would be very cruel in you to try to see her or to write to her again. And my mother must know what is right."

"O Maria! you don't understand—you are to young to understand—you can't imagine how I suffer."

"I'm sorry for you, George—very sorry! But you can't marry Vallie now, and why should you wish to see her?"

"I would marry her this moment, if she would have me," cried the young man, wildly. "Why should she give me up to Isabel Monair? My parents made that match; but I have chosen Vallie myself, and if she will only take me back again, I will be true to her to the end. You have been my good little friend, Maria, from first to last. Go and tell her so from me."

But the child hung back.

"I heard my mother say last night, George, that, perhaps, after all, it was the best thing that could have happened. She said that you were rich, and of a good family, and that if you had married Vallie, you might have been

ashamed of us all, and tried to make her ashamed too."

"Your mother does not know me, Maria. If Vallie would take me, I swear I would serve in the shop to-morrow—ay, and feel proud and happy to do it, all the while."

"Then you don't despise us because we are greengrocers, George?"

"Bless the child! No."

"If you really mean that, I have half a mind to go and tell Vallie you are here."

"Oh, go—go at once!"

"Take my music, then."

She flung the roll at his feet, and set off at a swift run.

Mr. Monair paced up and down with the bag of books in one hand and the music in the other; and passers-by stared at him, and wondered what on earth he could be doing with such things. He minded their scrutiny little; in fact, I think he was hardly aware of it. He was only intent upon that corner round which his little messenger had disappeared. Only looking, listening, longing, waiting to see her back again.

She came, after a little time, but so slowly and sadly that he knew, when he first caught sight of her, that she brought no good tidings. His heart sang down like a lump of lead within his bosom, and he could not speak when the girl came up and looked sadly into his face.

"She will not see you; but it has made her so ill!" she said. "She gave me that, and told me to ask you to read it when you were alone. And then she fainted away again; and mother came, and oh, she is so angry, George, because I have seen you. I would come to bring you the note; but I must go back now. Good-bye, George. Oh, I'm sure I wish we were all dead together, and well out of this world, where there is nothing but trouble on every side!"

He let her talk on after she had put Valeria's little note into his hand. He let her go, kissing her tenderly as she burst into tears, and then he tore open the precious bit of paper. The note was very short and very sad:

"DEAR GEORGE:—You must not come here any more. I cannot see you, and Maria was very wrong. But the poor child is so unhappy about us, that I cannot scold her."

"It is very kind of you to offer to marry me still—but that must not be. It is all over between us—all over, and for ever. You must marry Miss Monair, and I will pray for you both. God bless you, dear George, and give you strength to be good and happy."

"VALERIA."

"P. S.—For my sake, please don't come to Brompton any more."

The unhappy young man looked from that fatal paper out into the busy street with a gaze of blank despair. There they were—the people who had no such grief as his to bear: there they were, passing to and fro, bargaining, selling, jesting, and laughing as if Brompton was the happiest place on earth. The old apple-woman at the corner of the street was lighting her pipe by that of a friendly countryman with an empty hod on his shoulder, and the two were laughing over some rude joke as if they would crack their sides. Just beyond them walked a young married couple, intent upon the contents of a small perambulator, which the father was proudly wheeling along; and, just across the square, a pretty servant-girl was lingering, mutton chops in hand, blushing at the compliments of a private in the First Life Guards. The cabmen, near the "Admiral Kepple", were listening to an article in a daily paper read aloud by one of their number from the box of his vehicle; the little children were trundling their hoops along the pavement, shouting to each other as they ran; and well-dressed young ladies swept in by twos and threes on their way to music and drawing lessons farther up the road. Every one was happy, every one was useful but him? And he had lost his only hope of peace and purity? Yet who cared? Who would stop to utter one word of consolation, as he stood there utterly alone and utterly forlorn?

It was a sweeping and an absurd judgment. In the first place, had any one ventured to pause and play the part of the good Samaritan to this wounded stranger, no one would have felt more indignant and astonished than he. In

his own mind, he would have decided that they must be either mad or tipsy, while he scornfully refused their proffered aid. In the second place, those very people whom he envied were, perhaps, no happier than himself, had he but known it. The old applewoman had an idiot son at home, for whose sake she sat there day after day, through summer's heat and winter's cold; and the bricklayer, though he laughed heartily just at that moment, was at his wit's end to provide decent food and lodging for his bedridden wife; the young married couple, proudly watching their first-born son, had pinched and denied themselves for weeks in order to array those baby limbs in garments dainty enough to satisfy their fond eyes; and the pretty servant girl and the life guardsman—ah! there was a secret between them which, in spite of their natural gayety, often filled both their hearts with remorse and guilty fear. As for the cabmen—poor fellows! Every one knows that they must have had quite enough to contend with at home and abroad; and even the children found many a grievance during the long bright day; while not one among that band of gayly-dressed school girls but had some private vexation of her own—only a mouse, it may be, but looking, in her undisciplined eye, quite as large as a mountain.

He had only made the same mistake which we make every day of our lives. "Alas!" cries Delia, "if Phillis had my trials, could she be so gay?" While Phillis, it may be, after her merry laughter is over, is crying her eyes out in her own little garret, and wishing she could always be as calm, as contented, and as little moved by passing events as Delia seems to be. "I could tell you tales—real tales, mind you," says my neighbor to me; "tales of my own life, my own sorrows, that would be far more interesting, far more affecting than any you can possibly write!" And I listen quietly, and say I shall be glad to hear them. But how does my neighbor know that I, too, may not have my own private griefs, which would make quite as good a story, did I choose to tell it, as any of his own? That idea never enters his head, you see. Perhaps it never enters mine concerning him till his remark puts it there. We all cry out loudly enough when the shoe pinches us, but we never seem to remember that the friend who walks so quietly at our side may possibly have tender feet, and be wearing a far tighter boot we. No "Pannus Corium" has ever yet been invented that can soothe such pangs as these. The best thing we can do is to shuffle along with as few grimaces and groans as we may. This was what the old applewoman, the guardsman and his sweetheart, the cabman, and the Irish laborer were doing: all praise to them for the worthy effort! But by what right did this spoiled darling of luxury, robbed only of one good which he had coveted, compare his troubles with theirs?

How little we know—oh! how little we know of the lives that are being lived around us. How poorly we can judge of a human reality from its outward ideal appearance! Look at that sad case which has only just been dismissed from the courts of law—the great trial for forgery, the conviction of the man who made a fraudulent sale of his estates, who escaped safely to a foreign land, where he might have lived and died in ease and luxury, who came back at last, of his own accord, and gave himself up to the justice he had outraged so long. Arraigned at the bar, and waiting for conviction, what did he say of himself and his antecedents? "My whole life has been a fearful mistake!" How many of us would have thought it a few short years ago! As I walked in the soft twilight of the summer evenings down St. Julien's road, through the brick fields, and under the railway-arch at Streatham, toward a certain place whose magnificence was the talk of the whole neighborhood, I used to see a splendid carriage, drawn by thorough-bred horses, roll swiftly by, and enter at those open gates. And musing over the house and its occupants, as I often did, I grew to feel a kindly interest in their fates. I used to look upon their wealth and splendor as part and parcel of the pretty neighborhood, and felt somewhat proud of it accordingly. Yet all

the while that heavy cloud hung over the doomed house, and I knew it not. Had I been asked to point out a spot free from care, a person blessed with every good that heart could wish, I should have named that beautiful place and its fortunate owner. And yet, at ball, at feast and revel, that sharp-pointed sword, suspended by a single hair, was hanging over the aching head! And now it has fallen! And as I write these words a penny paper lies upon my desk with a portrait of that well-remembered face; and in the street outside a ballad-monger is singing, in a doleful tone:

"A wretched man in a foreign land
For ever doomed to dwell,
How sad and awful is the fate—"

and so on; while mingling with the strain comes back the memory of those hopeless words, "My life has been one fearful mistake!" (words, alas! that so many of us might say with equal truth!) till I grow as nervous and desponding as even the ballad-monger could wish, and am tempted to write it down, as my firm and unalterable conviction, that there is no such thing as happiness in this world of mistakes and sorrow. Is it a morbid thought? The novelist sees with eyes that pierce through the ordinary veil of fact and things; and after an apprenticeship of long years, this literary second-sight—if I may coin an expression—becomes so strong that the heart grows sick. As the soft silence of a country evening comes closing in upon tired heart and brain, and I lift my eyes to the calm night sky, where the silver moon is shining, I often muse over the great articulate murmur of pain and woe that must ascend from the earth to the heavens, an audible voice of suffering that God and his angels knew how to hear. Take the low cry of the houseless, starving poor, the bitter laugh of the wanton and her momentary dupe, the sob of the widow and the orphan above a new made grave, the moan of ill-used animals, that most pathetic sound of all; the wail of a breaking heart, the despairing shriek of the suicide; would they not form themselves into a swelling minor key that would drown all the happy laughter of childhood, all the glad voices of youth, all the mad chiming of the joyful marriage bells? I think so. And if, as seems somewhat likely, we advance so far as to make balloon ascents no more than pleasant evening excursions, I believe that as we hang in the silent air, above this mighty Babylon, these sounds of grief will make themselves audible to our ears, even above the universal roar of the metropolis and its inhabitants.

CHAPTER XIV.

But while I have been discoursing upon the science of happiness, I have left my hero standing in the street, with the letter which he called his "death-warrant" in his hand. What was he to do? Where was he to go to drive away his grief? Like most light-hearted people, he hated to be unhappy. He could not bear sorrow; and the first thing he did when it came to him at last, was to endeavor to get rid of it as soon as possible. He folded up the letter, walked slowly past Valeria's house, looking up at the closed windows as he did so, mounted his horse at the "Grapes", and rode straight to Halfmoon-street, Piccadilly.

There was no one in the morning-room when he entered except his aunt, who was half asleep over a volume of sermons, which she felt it her duty to read. But, while he was talking to her about the weather, the door opened, and Isabel entered with his uncle, the Colonel.

"You here, Georgey?" said the old man, looking greatly pleased. "That is right. Isabel and I were just wondering if you would call to-day."

Mr. Monair looked at Isabel. As if in honor of his visit, she had decked herself in his favorite color—blue. But that was not all; with the help of her maid, she had contrived a *fac simile* of poor Valeria's simple morning dress, and wore it with an air of utter unconscionableness that was not the least provoking part of the business. There was the trim little waist fastened with pearl buttons; there were the neat linen collar and sleeves, the blue silk tie, the coquet-

tish black apron, the kid slippers and white stockings, he remembered so well; and she looked in his face, as he glanced at them, with an air of smiling malice that made her meaning very plain. The Colonel and her mother only noticed that she had on a new and very becoming dress; but George understood that it was an insult to his tender memory of her who had first worn it—an outrage upon every feeling that his heart held most sacred. His angry glance delighted Isabel; she had gained her end by provoking him, and was content.

The Colonel, blind to all this by-play between the plighted pair, began to talk to his nephew about the arrangements which were being made for the marriage.

"A special licence is a very easy thing to get now-a-days, and the quicker the ceremony is over the better. Every one is out of town, so we need make no stir about the matter. Bell will invite her own bridesmaids, and I will see to the breakfast? Is there anything you would like to do, George? Anything you would like to say?"

"That is the last question they ask a man before they hang him," said the young man, bitterly.

Mrs. Monair looked up with some astonishment. Isabel bit her lips. But he went on. He felt so reckless, so lost, so desperate, that it was a positive relief to show them how heartily he abhorred the marriage they were forcing him into.

"And many a man has gone to the scaffold," he said, "with a lighter heart than I have here."

"Bless me, how very dreadful!" said Mrs. Monair, looking at Isabel. "My dear, if George really dislikes you so much, would it not be better to put the marriage off for a little while?"

"George's likes and dislikes are a matter of perfect indifference to me," said the young lady, with a look of scorn. "But I have been engaged to him for years. Every one knows it, every one wonders why we do not marry. If, at this late hour, he chooses to draw back and break his word for the sake of that wretched girl at Brompton, let him! I will not hold him bound to a promise he does not wish to keep."

"That wretched girl, as you call her, Isabel," said the young man, hotly, "has been the very first to plead your cause. She refuses to see me, she refuses to marry me, though I asked her again this very day."

"To-day!" cried the Colonel, aghast.

"Yes, I don't care who knows it. I went out to Brompton this morning, to see if I could meet her. If she would have eloped with me, I should have been far enough from London by this time. But she is the soul of honor, poor little thing! and though she loves me—by heaven! I know she loves me dearly!—she only sent word from her sick bed that I must keep my first promise and marry Isabel, and that she would pray for us both."

"Humph! I am very much obliged to her, I am sure!" said Isabel, looking coldly at his flushed face and quivering lips, as if she was studying a new and interesting problem in natural history.

"I can't bear it," he cried, grasping the Colonel's hand. "Isabel, I can't hear you talk of that angel in that cold-blooded, merciless way. Is it not enough that I have given her up forever, that I have broken the only heart that ever loved me? Why do you go on insulting her and me?"

"He is as mad as a March hare on the subject of the greengrocer's daughter," observed Isabel, turning toward the Colonel with a slight smile.

"Don't vex him too far, Bell—there's a good girl," said the Colonel, soothingly.

"Vex me! She drives me wild! Come with me, uncle. I feel as if I was choking."

He dragged his uncle from the room. Isabel shrugged her shoulders, and sat down to read.

"What a bore it must be to be so dreadfully in love!" she observed to her mother, as she settled herself comfortably in her easy-chair. The poor lady made no answer. She was puzzled and bewildered by all that had occurred. This was not the way in which she had been

wooed and won by the father of Isabel, when she was scarce her daughter's age.

Once alone with his uncle in the ante-room, Mr. Monair burst suddenly into tears. The old man felt his own eyes water as he gazed at him, and he patted him on the shoulder consolingly, as if he had been an urchin of ten years weeping for the loss of some favorite toy.

"There, Georgey, never mind; don't cry so. You have got yourself into a dreadful mess, and I know you must be tremendously cut up; but, after all, there is but one way out of it. The young lady at Brompton will not marry you, but Isabel will; and you must acknowledge that you have not behaved well to her. She has almost as much to complain of as the other, if we come to look into the case."

"What does she want me to marry her for?" burst out George. "I hate her, and she does not care three straws whether I am dead or alive."

"Well, I know neither of you feel very kindly toward each other just at present, my boy. But time will cure all that, and six months from now I trust you will be living very happily together; all this folly ended and forgotten."

"Ended it may be, and is!" said George; "but it will never be forgotten by me till they lay me in my grave. Uncle, when I think of that gentle little thing lying ill out yonder, and then look at Isabel, I have scarcely patience to speak to her. Oh! if she was only a man, how soon I would call her out for her yesterday's work."

"I am a man, and I was there," said the Colonel, smiling sadly. "Why don't you call me out, my boy?"

"Because you are my kind, good uncle always," said the young man, touched with a pang of remorse at the sight of the sad face turned toward him. "And you will forgive me all this, I know. I am behaving badly to you as well as to Isabel; but I cannot help it. I am desperate, and at times I feel as if I was going mad in earnest, as Isabel says."

"Poor boy!" said the Colonel, pressing his hand. "It brings back my young days to see you like this. I can remember when I was in love with pretty Polly Hayes, our Adjutant's daughter, and fit to blow my brains out for her sake, when they took her away."

"Hem! She married the Drum-Major, a great ignorant lout of a fellow, with nothing but his six feet of stature and his red cheeks and black eyes to recommend him. She has eight children now, and has forgotten all about long ago, I dare say," the Colonel added, with a sigh.

The poor man did not mean to be in the least satirical; but he seemed so; and George's thoughts turned instantly from Valeria, pale and sorrowful, stretched on a bed of sickness, to Valeria "fair, fat, and forty", and the mother of eight young greengrocers, with loud voices and large appetites. It was not a pleasant idea. He shrank from it with a shudder of disgust; and yet it haunted him persistently.

"Well, in the years to come, I may be telling my son the same tale you have just told me," he said, with a sigh. "I suppose I shall get over it, as other men have done before me; but just at present, uncle, it looks a wretched world."

"I dare say it does, my boy; but no trouble lasts for ever, that is one great comfort. Try and put yours out of your mind as much as you can, and do what is right. That is all that is left you now."

"Oh! I will marry Isabel, since I must—unless I turn coward, and take to my heels at the very altar. I will not promise, mind you, that I shall not do that."

"There is little fear. And now will you go back to her?"

"Not I."

"But it will look so strange."

"I cannot help it. Isabel knows, as well as you do, just what I am thinking, and feeling, and suffering. If she persists in forcing herself upon me during these few days of grace, if she keeps me dancing attendance here, she will lose me. You may tell her so plainly. All I ask now is, to be let entirely alone—to come and go

as I like, and where I like. When you want me for the ceremony, I will come; till then, Half-moon street will see very little of me."

"Bless, me, how odd! What will Isabel say?" ejaculated the bewildered Colonel. But his nephew was already half-way down the stairs, and there was nothing for him to do but to return to the ladies, and account for his disappearance as best he could.

Mr. Monair kept his word. Except when positively summoned by his bride or her legal advisers, he never made his appearance at the house. Where his time was spent, or who were his companions, not even the Colonel knew. Isabel cared very little what he did, or where he went; but Valeria, on her sick bed—Valeria, who had such a horror of evil for its own sake ah! what tears of agony would she not have wept, had she been able even to imagine in what way the unhappy young man was trying to forget her!

CHAPTER XV.

"When I heard you sing that burden,
In my vernal days and bowers,
Other praises disregarding,
I but hearkened that of yours.
Only saying,
In heart playing,
Blessed eyes, mine eyes have been,
If the sweetest his have seen!"

Never was there a more dismal wedding-day than Isabel Monair's. The morning had dawned brightly enough, but, before ten o'clock, clouds obscured the sky; a high wind rose, and when the carriages drew up before St. George's Church, a heavy rain was falling. The bridesmaids looked pinched and blue. Mrs. Monair shivered under her thin cloak; Isabel looked as if she was carved out of marble, and the bridegroom's face was clouded over as gloomily as the sky. The clergyman wondered secretly, as the sermon proceeded, what could possibly have brought the two together; and Isabel's cold, clear voice, and Mr. Monair's half-murmured replies, alike jarred upon his ear. They came at once to a dead stop. The final question, "Wilt thou take this woman?" had been asked, and every one was waiting for the reply. But none came. The bridegroom stood with his eyes fixed on the ground—not on his bride's face; and a sort of gloomy, desperate resolve seemed forming in his mind to free himself, even at that late hour, from the bondage he abhorred. Mrs. Monair turned pale—the Colonel fidgeted about—Isabel raised her eyes and looked at him steadily. The power of her glance was felt by him, even in that sullen mood. He looked up, quailed a little before the angry glare in those deep dark eyes, and muttered sullenly, "I will," with the air of a schoolboy who yields to any terms rather than receive the whipping which he so richly deserves. Isabel smiled slightly as she heard the irrevocable words pronounced, but in her heart, at the same moment, she registered a vow. He was hers now, to have and to hold for ever. But for that momentary hesitation in confirming the sacrifice which he had agreed to make—for that instant's despairing pause, which told so plain a tale, especially to her young lady friends who were watching him eagerly—oh! for that she would have full revenge—for that she would exact full payment, even to the uttermost farthing! And, uttering this vow inwardly, she pronounced the words appointed for her, and the ceremony drew to a close.

The Colonel drew a long breath of thankfulness when they were fairly in the vestry at last.

"Good heavens! George, how could you frighten me so?" he whispered to his nephew as they stood a little apart from the gay group who were thronging round the bride with smiles and kisses and congratulations.

"A very near thing, wasn't it, uncle?" replied the young man, with a dreary laugh. "If there had been an open door 'convenient', as the Irish say, I should have bolted, I am sure, and Isabel would have lost her husband."

"Well, she has him now; and I hope all will go on well."

"How can it go otherwise, my dear uncle? This is one of the matches that are made in heaven, you know, and which sinners like you and the rest of our worthy friends here, are only

allowed to witness by accident, as it were. Did you ever see a more modest bride or a more enraptured bridegroom?"

"George, I do hope, now that you are a married man, you will be kind, and steady, and good, and all that sort of thing," said the poor Colonel, a little aghast at the turn the conversation was taking. Here, as once before in Isabel's case, he felt called upon to utter some word of advice, some grave and friendly counsel. Yet his tongue failed him. He was ashamed to speak the words that were on his lips lest George should laugh at him. And so he looked contemplatively at his white kid gloves, and held his tongue. George burst into a fit of laughter that turned the eyes of the bridal group upon him instantly.

"Uncle, your sermon is worth a dozen from the parson. Rely upon it, I shall speedily become 'all that sort of thing', with a vengeance! And now we must go back to breakfast. Mrs. Monair, are you ready?"

He offered his arm to Isabel, with a mocking smile, and led her to the carriage.

The wedding breakfast was as stupid and foolish as all wedding breakfasts are, but the conduct of the bridegroom on the occasion was certainly an exception to the general rule. He never spoke to his bride—in fact, he spoke to no one except when he was positively obliged to do so. He looked little like a man who was living "the happiest day of his life" as he made his speech; and the speech itself was so strange, so cold, so almost sarcastic and bitter, that Isabel sat gnawing her lip nervously all the time he was speaking, and the pretty bridesmaids exchanged glances of wonder with each other, and began to fancy that she had not made so wonderful a bargain as they had supposed. George Monair was certainly handsome, and elegant, and fascinating, but what should make him "so odd" at his wedding feast? Poor Isabel! how could she expect to live happily with him all her life long, if he began like this?

"Poor Isabel", conscious of their looks, their thoughts, their wonder, and their pity, sat smiling and beautiful by the side of her moody bridegroom. But under that fair mask, rage and hate were filling her haughty heart. How dared he insult her so carelessly, so publicly, and at such a time? But she would be revenged; and for every stab he had given her vanity that day, she would make his heart-strings bleed. She knew so well where to wound him mortally. Through that pink-and-white-faced girl at Brompton she could pierce him to the very heart. And she would do it!

Who could have guessed that the graceful bride was thinking those thoughts as she withdrew from the room to put on her traveling attire? The meek, gentle mother, who accompanied her to act for the last time as lady's maid, never dreamed it. She hung about her in an unusually affectionate way, and kissed her just before they went down stairs together.

"George is a little vexed and hurt, my dear, and we cannot wonder at it," was her sole remark. "But don't take any notice of his manner, and I'm sure that it will all be right when you are away together."

"Have no fear for me, my dear mother," said Isabel, quietly. "I shall soon bring Master George to his senses. He is my property now; and the next time you see him, I trust you will find that he is much changed, and for the better."

There was a vicious light in her eye as she spoke, that boded ill for her husband's future peace, if he attempted to repeat the insults of that morning. This was no Katherine to be tamed by a Petruchio, and a pair of scissors snipping up a new dress. Isabel's Petruchio might have cut up her whole wardrobe, if he had liked, without frightening her in the least. And then he would have had the pleasure of purchasing a new and far more costly one, and of owning himself beaten by that cold, remorseless, overbearing will.

She drove away from her mother's house as composedly as if she had been setting out for an afternoon's excursion, rather than the long voyage of life. When they were fairly off, George turned and looked at her with a savage

"Well, Isabel!"

"Well, George!"

"You have got your heart's desire now."

"I have—and I mean to keep it too!" she answered, coolly.

He said nothing more, but pulled a morning paper from his pocket and began to read. Nothing daunted by this strange behaviour, Isabel took from her traveling-bag the first volume of a popular novel, and was soon buried in its pages. Mr. Monair watched her from behind his paper with wondering eyes. She was really reading, not pretending to read, as he was doing. There was no mistaking her air of quiet interest, of absorbed attention, in the tale. What was she made of? Had she a heart? Had she any sort of feeling about her? As he gazed at her, and she continued to read without once troubling her head about him, he felt very much like a simple fly entrapped in a spider's glittering web, and waiting for the moment when the cold-blooded insect would pounce upon and devour him. It was a pleasant beginning, certainly, to that sort of companionship which they had sworn, only two hours before, should last until death did them part.

The Colonel, left behind after the wedding-guests had departed, exchanged confidences with Mrs. Monair upon the subject with a candor that did him credit.

"Gad! It was a regular George IV. business over again!" he remarked. "I was dooced afraid every moment that he would turn his back on her and call for a glass of brandy-and-water, as the Prince did, when he saw his bride. Luckily, he spared us that; but how disgracefully he behaved at the breakfast! I couldn't have believed it of him, if I had not seen it with my own eyes. I was disgusted—positively disgusted."

"But if George IV., who was the 'first gentleman in Europe', you know, behaved so to his bride, there was not so much harm in George, poor boy!" said Mrs. Monair, perfectly unconscious of the implied satire in her words. "And you know it was rather annoying to have Isabel go out to Brompton, and lecture him before that girl and her mother."

"Good gracious! Would you have had her stop quietly here, and let him run off with the girl? For that is where it would have ended, if we had not interfered."

"Well, I suppose you know best. But I cannot blame the poor fellow for feeling a little annoyed."

"He might, at least, have had the decency not to exhibit that annoyance before his guests," growled the Colonel.

But Mrs. Monair, having got the brilliant example of the Prince Regent into her head, was so ready in making excuses for her son-in-law, that the Colonel grew tired of grumbling. Besides, with her, marriage was the universal panacea for every evil under the sun; and to all his fears, lest people should "talk" about his nephew's strange behavior, she offered two pleas—one being, "But you know they are married, Alfred, dear;" the other, "Well, people are always talking about something or other, and I dare say they will let it drop in time. And it will all be the same to us, you know, a hundred years from now."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" was the Colonel's irrelevant reply to this wise axiom, advanced for the hundredth time. And then he took himself off to his club, and left her to her embroidery, her novel, and her memories of Isabel.

But I wonder what the Colonel and Mrs. Monair would have said—what George and Isabel would have thought—had they known one thing? It was this: That while that solemn mockery of a wedding was going on, a pale little pitiful face, and tear-stained, was looking down upon it from the gallery; and that when the carriage drove away from the door, two simply-dressed young girls stood at a little distance among the vulgar crowd, and watched it off before they entered the humble cab that was waiting for them in the next street.

Ah! what a sad and weary heart it was that went back to the greengrocer's house at Brompton, while the bride and the bridegroom sat reading, side by side, as they rolled toward their beautiful country home.

CHAPTER XVI.

So, the hero having been disposed of, it only remains with us to look after the welfare of the heroine, who is left behind. How long is that poor Valeria, who has really committed no fault, except the very common one of loving and being loved—how long is she to be left upon her sick-bed, mourning for the lover who can be her lover no more?

Not very long, I assure you. It is not "proper" to continue to love a married man unless he happens to be married to you; and good Mrs. Grant had as strict an eye to the "proprieties" of this life as any fine lady of them all. Never having been in love in her life—if we except that very mild attack of sentiment which led her to bestow her hand upon the worthy green-grocer—she was inclined to look upon Valeria's sadness as a species of "nonsense" to which all young girls were subject while receiving the attentions of handsome young men, and which would be more speedily cured by change of air, country diet, and plenty of exercise and amusement, than anything else. Accordingly, Valeria and her faithful confidante, Maria, were dispatched, like two bales of goods, to their uncle's farm in Hampshire, where they had often visited as children, and where Valeria had spent four consecutive years of her delicate early girlhood.

The old Bruce farm! How pleasantly the words sounded in the girl's ear, as they drove from the little Forest Station toward it! And the old Bruce farmhouse too! She had seen it under every aspect; with the first sweet breath of the spring sweeping through its spacious rooms, and the broad golden rays of the summer sunshine lying on the floors; with the cold winds of autumn enhancing the comfort of the blazing fires, and the snows of winter giving a sense of security to every one within its hospitable walls; and Kate Bruce had been her dearest playmate in those days of old, and she had shared her father's knee and good-night kiss with her more times than she could count. Dear Kate! she had but that father to protect her; her mother's grave was in that "bonnie Scotland", of which Alan Bruce told such stirring tales to the listening children at his knee. Katie—whose second name had been given her in honor of Burns' Highland Mary—Katie Campbell Bruce grew up in that sequestered farmhouse, fresh and lovely as a mountain-flower.

She had a brother, Malcolm, whom Valeria remembered only as a fair-haired, round-faced, blue-eyed urchin, resolute, daring, and mischievous, who always laughed when she fell down and hurt herself, and who curled his lip most contemptuously when he found Katie teaching her to skate and slide upon the little stream behind the house. Valeria was neither glad nor sorry when Malcolm went away to school. She had her little lovers, even at that early day, who were very gracious to her, and she did not waste many thoughts upon her troublesome tomboy cousin. How it all came back to her, as she drove through the half-forgotten village street, where she had played so often with Katie and those little lovers, grown men now! Which were the most real? The early days with the bright halo of purity and peace around them, or these later and more troublous hours, when her heart knew no rest and little pleasure because of what it had found and lost?

A sudden turn in the green, forest road brought them in sight of the farm. The house was low, and built of stone, overhung with ivy, and surrounded by a garden filled with flowers. Before it was the baked white road, behind it the singing stream and the mighty forest, in whose cool recesses she had so often spent her summer days.

It was a lovely day—a day to be happy in. The evening was fresh, and pleasant, and bright; the air was full of the songs of birds; the flowers lifted their bright-hued heads to catch the last rays of sunshine, and the leaves rustled and waved about softly in the wood, as if they were whispering secrets to the gentle wind that stirred them.

A lady stood at the roadside gate, waiting to welcome the travelers with eager look and smile. Forgetful of the equal change in herself, Valeria gave a little scream of surprise at the sight of her. Tall, slender, and elegant, with soft, dark, gray eyes, and gleaming golden hair, could that young lady be the wild little girl with whom she had romped, and frolicked, and torn her pinafores ten years ago? Tears sprang to their eyes unbidden as they kissed each other.

"It is but a sorry welcome to you," said Katie, smiling through those tears. "I know you never used to like me to cry. But, O Val-lie, you are so changed! I am almost afraid I would rather see the little girl in the green gingham frock than you."

"Yes," said Vallie, sighing. "I should like to see my little playmate, too. But that cannot be. And it is ten years since we met, Katie, and life changes us all, you know. Especially, if we have not always had a bed of rose-leaves to lie upon."

She spoke so sadly, and looked away toward the sunset west with such a dreary glance in her eye, that Kate was startled.

"Yes," she said, regarding her friend more earnestly. "You are right: life does change us all. But I never felt it so much as I do now."

They went toward the house together. Maria followed more slowly, watching the farm-laborer, who was driving into the yard with the carriage which had brought them from the station.

Two fair-haired children stood in the farmhouse door. The youngest, a boy, who could scarcely speak plain, held out his arms to his mother. The little girl, a few years older, looked up into Valeria's face with a winning smile.

"Kate, how strange it all seems!" she said, as she bent down to kiss the children. "Can these be yours?"

"They certainly are. Troublesome pleasures, Vallie," said the young mother, looking at her children with a smile that betrayed how little trouble they really were.

"You are very happy," said Valeria, looking at her, at them, and at the pretty house, with a glance that was almost envious. How preferable that rich and full existence seemed compared to her own lonely, vacant, disappointed life!

Kate looked at her roguishly.

"Well, my dear, what should keep you from being equally happy? Here is my brother."

"O Kate!"

"I see you have not forgotten our old plans, my dear."

"Your plans—not mine? You know how angry I used to get when you talked about them."

"Ah! but you will not now, after you have once seen Malcolm. He is my only brother, and I may be partial; but do you know, Vallie, it seems to me that there is no one like him."

"Not even John Paul?"

"Ah! John Paul is my husband, my dear; it will never do for me to praise him to you. But seriously, Vallie, I want you to like Malcolm—I have set my heart upon it."

"And Maria and I have set ours upon getting into the house, Katie, if you will allow us to do so."

"Bless me, how rude I am! What must you think of me?"

"Just what I always did, Katie," said Vallie, laughing. "That you are Malcolm-mad."

"Now, to punish you for that saucy speech, I shall introduce you to him this very instant," said Mrs. Paul, throwing open the door of a small parlor as they entered the hall. "Here he is; shake hands with Malcolm."

A gentleman, who had been standing near the window, came forward, and offered his hand to Valeria, with a pleasant smile. She took it in mute astonishment.

"Can this be Malcolm?" she exclaimed, while her eyes dwelt upon the noble stature, the graceful head, with its fair clustering hair, the

calm and beautiful face, the blue eyes full of life and light, and the faint, golden-brown moustache just shading the delicate upper lip.

"Yes; it is Malcolm!" he said, "almost as great a tease and plague as ever, I am afraid, but very glad to welcome his cousins to the old Bruce Farm once more, in spite of all that."

Mr. Paul entered at that moment, followed by his father-in-law, who kissed Valeria, complimented her good looks, and welcomed her to his house with a heartiness that did her good.

When the bustle of the reception was over, and the group were chatting gayly together, Valeria sat apart, with her head leaning on her hand. The unexpected change was almost painful to her. She might learn to love the new friends tenderly and well, but the children who had played with her during those long, blue, summer afternoons, would never meet her there again. And Malcolm—Malcolm's way of speaking and looking, and the peculiar beauty of his face—ah! she knew only too well for her own peace of mind, of what and of whom they reminded her so vividly. Malcolm, also, at that moment had his dreams of her. He had seen the sadness in her eyes, those "bonny wells of eyes", whose single glance had haunted him. And the lines of Tennyson came to his mind as he watched her.

"O sweet pale Marguerite,
O rare pale Marguerite,
What lit your eyes with tearful power,
Like moonlight on a falling shower?
More human in your mood,
Than your twin sister Adeline,
Your hair is darker, and your eyes
Touched with a somewhat darker hue:
And less aerially blue,
But ever trembling through the dew,
Of dainty woful sympathies."

When a young man begins to quote poetry in his own mind about a lady's eyes, we can generally give a pretty shrewd guess as to what will happen.

Late that night, when Maria was sleeping soundly, and the house was still, Valeria sat by the window of her little room and looked out. The village church was but a little way off; she could see its spire glittering in the moonlight behind the trees. Beyond it rose the mountains, at whose dark tops she liked to look so well. She leaned her head upon her hand and mused. What had they done without her? How much had they missed her at home to-day? Had her mother shed a tear because her two children had left her? Ah! she knew very well; and her own eyes grew moist at the thought of the kind heart that loved her so. Life was not all a blank (though its richest prize had been lost) while that dear mother's love remained.

Then her thoughts went back to her school-days. How pleasant, how full of sunshine, how free from care they looked, now that she had found out that there was such a thing as unhappiness in the world! How she used to stroll with Katie out through the little country-town, and stand upon the hill from which it took its name, to watch the rising and the setting sun. How often they got leave of absence on a Wednesday afternoon to take those strolls, or to visit the brown-stone house that was their holiday home. Did Katie remember those days as well as she did—the sails upon the river, the strolls upon its banks with Malcolm and with others whom they might never meet on earth again? Troubled—tossed with tempests, and not comforted, as she had been of late, those simple and quiet delights seemed to Valeria the sweetest memories of her life, and she sat and thought of them till the tears came to her eyes with a kind of passionate prayer that she might be taken, if it so pleased God, from the trouble and the grief which had darkened her later days. To die, at that moment, seemed far sweeter to her than to live! To die; gazing once more upon that fairy land which she had lost for ever; seeing the same glorified sky, the same enchanted earth, and feeling the same winds that played around her then. Oh! that would be sweet indeed!

She looked at Maria sleeping quietly; she thought of Katie, whose past had been the same.

One was as quiet, as happy as the other, and only she was sad and ill at ease. And yet she remembered one evening—a July evening, calm and still—when the school had broken up for the holidays, and the scholars were free from all restraint. That freedom only brought parting with it, and though those who were about to separate looked cheerful, and spoke of a speedy meeting; in their hearts they knew too well that such a thing might never be! Once away from that house, and they were parted for ever!

And Katie! She stood on the steps of the schoolhouse that night, her face pensive, and, it may be, sad, and her dark eyes lifted thoughtfully toward the moon that shone then as she always shines, let her worshipers on earth be sad or gay. Katie's eyes at that moment were dimmed with coming tears, and though she was a wife and a mother now, Valeria knew well that neither her husband nor her children had ever seen the look which she saw then, as they stood side by side, mere maidens, with the world before them where to choose! The first fond fancy of a young girl's heart lived and died in that glance toward the moonlit sky. And now it was all over, and Katie, happy in her home, her husband, and her children, would probably laugh heartily if Valeria ventured to conjure up before her the image of the slim young apothecary's clerk, who wore spectacles, and sang in the choir, and for whom the apple-faced school-girl avowed that she should certainly die!

And six years had passed away, and strange faces were in the streets that they had so often paced, strangers were in the houses they had loved to visit. Katie had forgotten the romance of her early girlhood in a woman's love; Valeria's romance had come much later, and promised to last much longer than hers had done. Would the time ever come when she could think and speak of George Monair as Katie would probably speak of the apothecary's clerk, should she chance to hear his name?

Valeria fairly shuddered at the thought, as she extinguished her lamp and crept into bed.

CHAPTER XVII.

"There is no one beside thee, and no one above thee—
Thou standest alone, as the nightingale sings.
And my words that would praise thee are impotent things,
For none can express thee, though all shall approve thee.

I love thee so dear, that I only can love thee!

"Say, what can I do for thee? weary thee, grieve thee?
Lean on thy shoulder, new burdens to add?
Weep my tears over thee, making thee sad?
Oh! hold me not! love me not! let me retrieve thee!
I love thee so dear, that I only can leave thee!"

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

By degrees, something of the old peace and calmness came back to Valeria in her country home. Maria returned to Brompton, after a visit of two weeks, but Valeria was to be spared longer, "so that she might come back strong, and well and happy," her mother wrote. And she was well content to stay.

By degrees, she and her cousin Malcolm grew to be the dearest friends. It was Malcolm who was by her side during the long walks and rides they took each day—Malcolm, whose rapt eye was lifted to the moonlit sky that filled her soul with poetry—Malcolm, who read and sang to her when, weary of the day's pleasures, she sat in the dark old parlor, where Katie flitted to and fro like a sunbeam, brightening everything and everybody around her with her glad smile.

And through it all Valeria was blind! The bitter dream of love which she herself had had, and whose fading had left her life such a blank, kept her from her another—kept her also, which was worse, from seeing that Malcolm might be dreaming even though she was broad awake. She felt old, and cold, and weary herself, and fancied that every one else must do so. And she had grown ambitious, I am sorry to say; and was beginning to look upon marriage rather as a means of social elevation than as a foundation for domestic happiness. It was a sad pity that so sweet and fresh a nature should be spoiled by any taint of worldliness; but, alas! this love plays the very mischief with us all, when it cannot have its own foolish, willful way. And Valeria fared no better than the rest of us,

after falling into the merciless urchin's grasp. She might have been happy once as the wife of an unknown farmer—not now.

So the weeks glided away—pleasantly to all. The whole village was ringing with the praises of Valeria. Those who had known her as a pale-faced little child, were surprised and delighted to meet a beautiful young lady who had remembered them so well, and was ready and willing to own that she did so. No empress sitting on her throne ever held a more *bona fide* court than she. All the morning she was invisible, sitting up in her little chamber, where the branches of the oak-trees outside made pleasant shadows on the floor; reading, writing, sewing at times, but singing softly to herself far oftener. The afternoon was sacred to her domestic pleasures—to the society of her cousin, her uncle, the children, and those of her young friends who were familiar enough to join the quiet family circle. Tea once over, however, the latch of the garden-gate was sure to be unfastened, and, one after another, the visitors dropped in. Valeria was in her element then; laughing, singing—I am afraid I must add, flirting—with her worshipers, till the moon rode high in the heavens, and the lights had gone out along the village street. At such times, however, her cousin Malcolm was by no means in his element. The sight of so many faces in his quiet home annoyed him. He loved Valeria, and he wanted her all to himself. He could not bear that others should be privileged, even as he was, to gaze upon that beautiful face, to hear that sweet voice, to hold that slender hand a moment as they said good-bye. And, since they were so privileged, he deserted the pleasant parlor night after night, but stood outside for hours, beneath the forest trees, watching, as the curtains waving in the air gave him momentary glimpses of the lighted room.

One week after Maria's departure, there was a grand gathering at the Bruce farm, into which Valeria entered with her whole heart and soul. The busy time was almost over at the farm. The hay was safe in the great barns, the grain housed and the land dug over. Nothing remained of the great harvest but some late apples on the orchard trees. They were to be gathered on this day, and Katie and Valeria, by way of doing something original, had determined to take the work out of the hands of the farm laborers into their own. All the young people in the neighborhood were invited to assist, and to wind up the day with a supper and a dance on the cool greensward of the orchard.

The orchard was just beyond the house. It extended a long way in a straight line, and the trees were planted in regular rows on either side of the field, leaving a wide space, level and green, like an avenue, between. There was room enough and to spare for a quadrille, and thirty-two couples were to stand up after supper and dance by the combined light of the moon and the paper lanterns which were to be hung from the branches of the trees.

When Valeria entered the orchard that afternoon, it looked little like a ball-room. Great carts, drawn by sedate-looking horses, stood here and there along the avenue, and barrels, baskets, and pails were under every tree, while a laughing crowd of young people shouldered each other about, and gathered the fruit with the greatest good humor. Valeria joined them, and was pressed into service at once, and compelled to gather the golden pippins that fell from the branches of a tree called "Dorothy's Early", after the daughter of the former owner of the farm. Poor Dorothy Hart! She had grown up in that quiet home; had become a wife and a mother; and now the grass was growing over her grave in the village churchyard, while those whom she had never seen were jesting and enjoying themselves as they shook the apples from her favorite tree!

They worked till the sun was almost down; and not till the last cart was going toward the barn, laden with empty baskets, did Valeria escape from her merry friends.

All that day her cousin Malcolm had been watching her; all that day he had been long-

ing to see and speak to her alone; but the perverse fates gave him no chance. He had made up his mind, like many another gambler, to risk his fate and his life upon a single throw of the dice. If luck befriended him, and he gained the love of Valeria—ah! he dared not think of that possibility, lest he should break out into some mad extravagance, which should forever alienate her from him. But, if he lost her, but one thing remained for him, and that was death! We all say that, when we are really in love for the first time—perhaps we say it for the second—but by the time the third experience of the little pangs and pains comes on—we know very well that it means nothing more than a very temporary disarrangement of the heart and liver, after which we shall go on and eat dinners, and attend parties, and enjoy life generally with a better zest than ever.

Malcolm waited and watched a weary while, on that evening of the harvest-ball, for his divinity. At last he heard the rustle of dresses, and the soft murmur of women's voices on the stairs. Yes, there she was, among a group of friends, dressed in a soft blue muslin, that set off her fair face and golden hair to the utmost advantage—a white rose at her breast and another in her hair. She danced, of course, but not with him, because he did not ask her. He watched her for a time, as she whirled around the room with a young lawyer who had been one of her boy-lovers; then he went into the quiet parlor, where the old folks were playing whist, and watched them by way of a change. But presently the magic of a voice drew him back again. Valeria was singing!

"I have heard thee sing of a sky more blue,
And a sun more warm than this;
And I've sometimes thought, if they tell me true,
To dwell in that home were bliss.

But, oh! when I gaze on my peaceful cot,
Where the clematis bowers entwine,
The land of the stranger tempts me not—
No, ne'er, can thy home be mine!"

The words were simple, but the melody was plaintive, and the voice of the singer one that, once heard, would haunt the heart forever. He was conscious of a vague, oppressive sadness when she finished the song. It seemed as if those words—"No, ne'er can thy home be mine!"—were sung to and for him, as if by them she would place an insurmountable barrier between them, then and forever. She rose from the piano, acknowledged the thanks of the circle around her with a faint smile, and as soon as the dancing recommenced, glided quietly from the room. Malcolm followed her, his heart beating fast and high; for the decisive moment for which he had watched so long, had come at last.

A little apart from the farm-house, but connected with it by a covered way, stood an old building, used only as a granary. Strange to say, this was one of Valeria's favorite retreats. One small room (accessible only by a path through the potatoes that covered the floor of the outer chamber) had been fitted up for her by Malcolm with a table, an easy-chair, and a swinging bookcase, filled with her favorite volumes. A door opened at one side of this room into a dim-looking closet, full of broken vials and old papers; the one window looked out over the hills for miles away, and gave her also a view of the road that led toward the village.

Many of her solitary mornings had been passed here, watching the autumn rain that fell steadily, and the hills that wrapped themselves the while in a thick gray mist. From that window she had looked, at times, when all the earth seemed brooding sadly over the winter so near at hand, and when the bell tolled faintly in the village church for some one who was just dead. And now, after all the mirth and merriment of the day, she had betaken herself to the little window for a few moments' quiet, while the rest were dancing.

"Fair shone the moon", touching the beautiful face, the graceful figure, and the pretty evening dress, with a gentle light that only heightened the charm. And as she stood looking up at the clear night-sky, and thinking of the day that would never return again, the great door of the old house opened, and she heard some

one stumbling through the potatoes on the floor outside.

"Is that you, my good Talbot?" she asked, thinking that her faithful dog had followed her.

"Talbot is in his kennel; it is Malcolm," was the reply.

"Oh! Come in, Malcolm," she said, cheerfully.

His manner had been so strange for a few days, and he had avoided her so carefully, that she fancied she must have offended him. He entered, and joined her at the window.

"A beautiful night," he observed, "and the moon shines brightly enough."

"But you do not bring a very cheerful face to the moon, my good cousin."

"Do I not?"

She held out her hand, with a frank smile.

"Come, Malcolm, out with it, as we used to say when we were children. What has been the matter with you for the last week? Have you been ill, or have I vexed you with any of my mad pranks?"

He looked at her with a sad smile.

"I think, Valeria, you could never vex me."

"Something has gone wrong with you, I am sure. Tell me what it is. There was never a trouble yet that could not be lessened by the telling it to another."

"Do you think so?"

He gazed at her admiringly. A shade of pensiveness was the only thing wanting, in his eyes, to her face, and it was added now.

There was a long silence.

"The moonlight makes one sad, if nothing else," she observed at last. "Let us go back to the dancers."

"I should say that sadness never came to you," he observed, without heeding her request.

"Why not to me, pray?" she asked.

"So young—so beautiful—so beloved!"

She waved her hand impatiently.

"Cousin Malcolm, I was not seeking for a compliment. I only wished to know on what grounds you exempted me from the common lot."

"Are not those I have already named sufficient?"

"Granting that I possessed them—no."

"Is it possible, then, that you have suffered—that you have been unhappy?"

She looked up to the moonlit sky with a smile.

"I have suffered," she said, as if she was speaking to herself rather than to him.

"Valeria, I would die gladly if I could make you happy."

She shook her head.

"I do not like to hear you say such things, Malcolm."

"Is it because you do not believe in them? Upon my life they are true! May I go on, Vallie?"

She saw it all now, and murmured faintly—

"Do not say any more, Malcolm."

"You must hear me now! I love you dearly!"

"You love me as a cousin, Malcolm. Nothing more. Do not say that. Take it back!"

"I cannot, for it is true!"

He hung his head sadly, and his blue eyes glistened with tears. She laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Cousin Malcolm, will you believe me when I say that I never dreamed of this? I thought I was like Katie to you—a sister, and nothing more. If we had met one year ago, you might have been my choice. But now, Malcolm, I am sure you will forgive me for all the pain I have caused you, when I tell you that I too have loved—and in vain!"

"In vain!" he said, looking with astonishment at her beautiful face. "Is it possible that you could love in vain?"

"Is it possible!" she said with a sigh. "Every one tells me that I am pretty, Malcolm," she said, frankly; "and I believe them at times. Yet this face, that won the love I coveted, could not keep it; the man I would have married only sought me for my beauty! And all the while, Malcolm, he was engaged to his cousin—a lady

far above me in every way. He is married to her now. And I am a weak, wicked, miserable wretch!" she added, bursting into tears. "For he is married, and I cannot forget him; I cannot keep from remembering how I loved him!"

He waited till she grew a little calmer.

"Dear Vallie," he said at last, "I grieve for you with all my heart. But you have lost him, and in time you will get over that loss, I think. Is there no hope for me in the future? Years hence—"

She shook her head.

"Years hence, if I live, I shall love him still!"

"Then farewell, Vallie!"

He leant his head upon her hand, to hide his tears. She touched his hair lightly with the other, and murmured:

"I am grateful to you, Malcolm, for I fancied no one cared for me. Let us go back to the old time, and be brother and sister once again!"

"As if that were possible!" he said, with a faint smile.

"It is! It must be! Let me be your sister, your little friend once more. I cannot lose you, Malcolm. I need a friend."

"Vallie! Vallie! where are you?" called gay voices outside. But she waited for his answer.

"Yes, yes; have it as you will," he said, hastily.

"There's my good cousin. I will thank you to-morrow," she said, as she wrung his hand and darted away to join her friends.

Malcolm did not return to the ball-room that night. But Vallie danced away, most perseveringly, till the clock struck twelve, and the party broke up.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Outspoke the bride's brither,
As he cam' in wi' the kye—
'Poor Willie wad ne'er hae ta'en ye
Had he kent ye as weel as I;
For ye are baith proud and saucy,
And no for a poor man's wife;
Gin I canna get a better,
Ise ne'er take ane a' my life.'"
—OLD SONG.

Days passed on, and neither Malcolm nor Valeria made any allusion to the conversation on the evening of the harvest supper. To all outward seeming, they were as friendly as ever. Only Valeria knew that Malcolm was silent and absent when by her side—not bright and gay, as he had once been. She was annoyed by the change; it made her more uncomfortable than she could say. "Foolish boy!" she would think, half indignantly, when one of their silent interviews was over, "what could have made him take that absurd fancy into his head? What nonsense it is for him to fancy he is in love with me! and what greater nonsense still to imagine that he can never get over it!"

It makes all the difference in the world, you see, whether it is in our own proper person, or in our neighbors, that we bear the pain and smart of such a wound. There is nothing so easy as to say to the next-door sufferer: "I am exceedingly sorry for you; but why on earth do you distress yourself about a thing which cannot be helped?"

Valeria's character, well-nigh perfect in some other respects, was tainted with this prevailing selfishness of the age. She could feel her own immediate troubles keenly enough, or the troubles of her own family; but her sympathies did not extend very far beyond the house at Brompton. And Malcolm, cousin though he was, got but half the pity he deserved from her.

Malcolm bore her somewhat trying behavior very well. If you have a hankering after a tempting cluster of grapes, which you cannot for the life of you pronounce to be "sour", it is certainly very aggravating to see them hanging quite within your reach, yet no more to be had than if they were a thousand miles away. And yet, poor fools that we are! how we always long, and linger, till at last the fortunate gardener comes by, carelessly eyes the tempting prize with a confident smile, lifts up his hand, and, lo! it is gone!

The fortunate gardener, in this one case, had not been so very fortunate, after all, since he had been obliged to leave the grapes behind

him. Much good that did his successor! Poor Malcolm knew it well; and yet he hung about Valeria day after day, and waylaid her in her walks and rides, only to find himself dumb in her presence, and committed a thousand other follies which he ought to have blushed at, and over which the girl sighed and smiled impatiently when she was once more alone.

He watched beneath her window at night, long after she was sound asleep, without a thought of him; he stole her slipper and her glove, and carried them about next his heart; he rode miles away, to buy her hot-house flowers, fruit, and new books; he turned day into night, and night into day, for her sweet sake; and all the while, in the depths of her heart, she was thinking what a goose he was making of himself for his pains. She could not love him while the memory of another stood so persistently between them; and I am afraid that, at times, his devotion bored and wearied her. If he could have got up a sudden show of indifference—if he could have seemed to be attracted by the charms of any of her young lady friends, it might have done him good service. But he was far too simple and natural to play a part. He only flung his heart at her feet, and she—let it lie there!

Malcolm, from constantly dwelling on this one unlucky idea, and studiously neglecting all the minor consolations of mutton-chops, baked potatoes, beef-steaks, and bread and butter, all the while, he grew as thin as a shadow and as pale as a ghost, and looked at them all with a worn and wearied expression in his beautiful blue eyes, that was pitiful to see. Then Katie took the matter in hand. Knowing that Valeria had a secret, she was not very long in getting at the bottom of it; but once there, all her sympathy and kindness was swallowed up in horror and dismay. So long as she had thought that an absent or a recreant lover was in the way, all was well enough; but when she discovered that the lost love was the lawful property of another woman, she grew indignant, and told Valeria she ought to be ashamed of herself: in the first place, for cherishing such a feeling, and in the second place, for allowing it, wicked as it was, to interfere with Malcolm's happiness, when the poor fellow loved her so dearly. Now, there are three things which you must not do with a woman. You must not insult the memory of a former love—because you also tacitly insult her own taste and judgment; you must not try to coax, or argue, or bully her into loving another—because, though in her own heart she may be slightly inclined to do so, your interference will instantly make her as obstinate as a mule; and you must not sit down upon her best bonnet—because that is an injury which women who wear bonnets will never really forgive.

Now, Katie had not sat down upon Valeria's best bonnet—her instincts as a woman would never have allowed her to commit so heinous a crime—but both the other offences lay at her door, and by right of her womanhood she ought never to have committed them. As a matter of course, a battle royal ensued, and poor Malcolm's cause suffered immensely through his female ally. The two cousins would scarcely speak to each other at dinner-time, and the next day Valeria announced her speedy return to Brompton. Katie was in a rage—Malcolm in despair—Vallie triumphant. She had had the best of the battle, after all.

It is just possible that a kinder mood might have come over her, that she might have remained a little longer at the farm—and that, in some of their long strolls through the forest, with the dead leaves lying thick upon their path, Malcolm's love, and grief, and patience might have won so far upon her, that she would have listened to his prayer, even if she did not immediately grant it. Just possible, I say, because hearts are caught at the rebound; and walks with handsome cousins, among the forest trees and autumn leaves, have sometimes rather a singular effect upon a young lady's nerves. But so simple a solution of the difficulty was not for a moment to be thought of. And so that tricky spirit, that imp of mischief, whoever he may

be, that is forever turning all our plans topsy-turvy, stepped in and brought a new actor upon the scene—an actor who confused all the others in their parts, and made the queerest medleys in the business of the stage. You can imagine why, when I tell you that you have already had the pleasure of meeting him once or twice in these pages, and that his name was Colonel Monair.

It happened thus. Isabel, in her Parisian home, felt bored and wearied, and longed to get back to London, to the familiar sights and sounds of an English winter. Accordingly, she wrote to her mother and her uncle, announcing her intention, and thereafter commissioned the same piece of intelligence to her husband, seeking him out in his smoking-room to do so. He took his cigar from his lips, and looked up at her with a peculiar smile.

"Please yourself, Mrs. Monair," he said, indifferently. "It's all one to me where I go now."

"It was not all one to you once," she said, sharply.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Once was a very long time ago, my dear. Only let me know the day before you start for England, that I may tell Antoine what to pack."

He resumed his cigar and his paper. She stood looking at him a moment, then went back to her own room, and closed the door behind her.

"Oh! how I hate that man!" she said aloud, clenching her hands. "How I wish I could sting him with pain once more! His cool, assumed indifference to all I say or do will kill me in the end!"

A discreet cough startled her. She looked up and saw her French maid standing by the window.

"You heard what I said, Rosalie?" she asked, sharply.

"I regret that Madame did not see me. But Madame's secret is as safe in my breast as in her own," replied the girl, laying her hand upon her heart.

"Not much of a secret, I fear," said Isabel, laughing; "for you must know, Rosalie, that I detest my husband."

"Many ladies do the same," said Rosalie, quietly.

"Yes; but they are not so honest as I am; they lie to the world and to their husbands all the while. So far as the world is concerned, I keep my own counsel, too, for the present. But Mr. Monair certainly knows that I do not adore him. If he does not, 'tis not for the want of telling; of that I am very sure."

Rosalie did not answer. It was her part just then to listen, not to talk.

"He seems even to have forgotten that green grocer's girl," continued Isabel. "I have a great curiosity to see if anything can move him from the stupid state he has fallen into; and so we are going back to England, Rosalie, at once."

Rosalie lifted her eyebrows imperceptibly.

"Will that be wise, with the girl still there?" she asked.

"Pshaw! I have long ceased caring for Mr. Monair's vagaries, I can assure you. Let him go out to Brompton as much as he likes, if she will receive him. I think I can find means of amusing myself during the tedious hours of his absence, especially if the Guards are in town," she added, with a little laugh.

Rosalie understood its wicked meaning well, and determined to accompany her mistress to "perfidious Albion" once more. She loved France and, above all, Paris, it is true; but with the prospect of so pretty a little farce to be played before her very eyes, how could she refuse to go?

Isabel's letter made the Colonel exceedingly uneasy.

"Now she has got him safely away from that white witch at Brompton," he muttered, as he read it over his late breakfast, "why cannot she rest contented? Why does she want to bring him back to the very spot where he can see the girl a hundred times a day if he likes? I'll be shot if I can understand the ways of these

women; and I don't think they know half the time themselves what they are driving at."

The Colonel was a shrewd man, you will observe. But that did not save him from doing a very foolish thing half an hour afterward. He actually sat down and wrote a letter to his nephew about Valeria, cross-questioning him closely as to his feelings toward her, and winding up with a pathetic entreaty to him not to come back if he felt the least disposed to ride out to Brompton the very day after his arrival in England. Having dispatched this letter, he trotted off to his club, feeling that a long-neglected duty had been well and faithfully performed.

Six months before, George Monair would have been immensely touched by the receipt of such a letter. But when it reached him, as he was dining at his hotel alone, he laid down his knife and fork, read it through, and then returned to his dinner, smiling now and then to himself.

"My uncle has lived sixty-five years in the world," he said that night, as he perused it again, in his bedroom—"sixty-five years in a world that ought to have taught him a little of its wisdom; and yet what a dear old simpleton he must be to write to me like this! Here goes for an answer that shall blind his innocent eyes still further." And he scribbled away over a sheet of note-paper, stopping now and then to sip brandy and water, to puff at his cigar, or laugh aloud over the farce he was playing, himself the only actor and spectator all the while. And the letter which the Colonel received one day later, was full of news of Paris doings and Paris people, with this one postscript tacked in, like a kind of afterthought, at the end:

"What could have possessed you, my dear uncle, to read me that solemn homily about the little greengroceress? Have you forgotten the days when you were young, and when, I doubt not, you 'loved and rode away' as well as the rest of us? Have no fears for me on the score of a whey-faced little thing like that! She sent me about my business, you know, and I find that,

"There are maidens in Scotland
More lovely by far,
Who would gladly be bride
To the young Lochinvar."

Only he happens to have a bride already, and a precious piece of goods she is, more by token! However, let her go—and let the other one go too, with all my heart. Ginger is still hot in the mouth, my dear uncle, and I find cakes and ale remarkably pleasant fare. So good-bye till we meet in England. May 'my lady' take it into her lovely head to make that move soon.

"Yours ever,

GEORGE.

"There's a young scamp for you!" thought the Colonel, as he took off his glasses. "And he calls that poor girl a whey-faced little thing already. I wonder what she would say if she knew it? I wonder what has got her, by the way! I hope she isn't ill, or dead, or anything of that kind. Some women take their first love-affair so much at heart—as if it was worth making any fuss about. Ah! well, if she lives to my age, she will know better, poor thing!"

His horse was at the door. He rode out to Putney, thinking of Valeria and her sorrows all the way, and then came back through Brompton. Seeing Maria standing in the door of her father's shop, he fancied it would be only polite to inquire after her sister, and, checking his horse, he took off his hat, and made her so grand a bow as he asked the question, that in her flurry she blundered out:

"Oh! Vallie is quite well. She is staying at Uncle Alan Bruce's farm in W—."

She would have given her ears not to have said it the next instant, but it was too late. The Colonel bowed again, thanked her, and rode away.

What sudden whim, what unaccountable impulse seized upon him, I cannot say. But the next night he slept in Hampshire, at the W— House, scarcely half a mile from Valeria's country home!

CHAPTER XIX.

Certainly the country did not wear its most agreeable aspect when the Colonel opened his eyes upon its beauties the next morning. A heavy gale, which he had been prophesying for more than a week, was blowing through the trees, and the air was full of flying, yellow leaves; while every now and then, as the wind

lulled a little, down came the cold rain with a relentless steady pour. The inn where he was staying looked out upon the village street, an unpaved, muddy thoroughfare, with a few houses and shops on either side—a deserted, empty-looking waste of road, that seemed to stretch over the hills, into that ambiguous territory described to him in his nursery-days as "No man's Land". The carrier's cart was wending its way slowly along that road, the brown mare hanging her head, and her master whistling a doleful ballad, as they jogged along. The mere sight of the two gave the Colonel the horrors, and he rang the bell for breakfast, with a melancholy doubt as to whether anything fit to eat could possibly be forthcoming in such an out-of-the-way place.

Breakfast soon appeared, and proved a much more tempting meal than he had hoped to see. The landlord waited upon him in person, and was as chatty and communicative as country landlords generally are. From him the Colonel learned many curious particulars concerning the neighborhood of W—. There was no resident lord or baronet, not even a resident squire; and, in consequence, the family at the Bruce farm took rank among their neighbors, and were almost looked upon, in the absence of higher magnates, as the aristocracy of the town. The Colonel was glad as well as surprised to hear this. Since he had come so far to call on a greengrocer's daughter, it was encouraging to find her in a comfortable and respectable home, instead of a cottage with a thatched roof and mud walls, as he had half feared he should do. His sudden adventure began to assume the appearance of a kindly act, rather than a foolish impulse of curiosity in his own eyes; and he fully persuaded himself into the belief that he was almost performing the part of a good Samaritan by seeking, through his own courtesy, to heal the wound which his nephew's behavior had made. And so, in spite of the wind and the rain which prevailed the next day, he set off, between eleven and twelve o'clock, to pay a visit at the farm.

The roads were almost flooded with the heavy rain; walking was quite out of the question, even for that short distance; so he performed the journey in a dismantled, old yellow post-chaise, which belonged to the inn. The advent of this crazy vehicle, with its two white horses and deaf old post-boy, produced considerable commotion in the farm-house when it was seen stopping before the gate; and no one could imagine who the "distinguished stranger" could possibly be, who was picking his way up the gravel path with such dainty steps, and in boots that were most indisputably of London manufacture.

The mystery was soon solved, however, by his knock at the door, and inquiry for "Miss Grant". Katie ushered him respectfully into the best parlor, and then ran away to look after Valeria, who had not been visible all the morning.

She was not in her own room. But meeting Malcolm on the stairs, he suggested the old granary as the most probable place of her retreat, and Katie flew there breathlessly to tell the news. Startled by Katie's sudden entrance, Valeria turned round and looked at her inquiringly.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Vallie, for making such a noise," said the eager messenger, "but a gentleman has come for you."

"A gentleman!"

"Yes—from London."

"Is it Cousin John?"

"Oh! no—an old gentleman—very handsome—with gray hair and whiskers—slender—straight as a dart. He looks like a soldier, Vallie. Do you know who he is?"

Valeria turned pale. She knew but one gentleman who answered to that description—what could he possibly want with her? Had anything happened to Mr. Monair? And had they sent him down to break the news to her?

It was the first thought that crossed her mind. She could have laughed at herself the next instant for entertaining it. Was it likely that those proud people would think of her, even if

George was dying? Was it likely that his wife would allow them to summon her to his death-bed, though he prayed for her presence with his parting breath? But who could this mysterious visitor be?

"You look so pale and frightened, Vallie," said Katie, who had forgotten their quarrel of the day before. "Do you know who it is? Don't you want to see him? Because I will not have you teased for forty like him, if you would rather he went away."

"No, I will go to him," said Valeria. "Where is he?"

"In the best parlor. Shall I go with you?"

"I will see him alone," said Valeria, walking away.

She went into the little parlor quietly enough, having persuaded herself on the way that there was not the slightest occasion for misgiving, since the messenger from town would probably turn out to be some neighbor, on his way to Southampton, who had called at W—, to leave a message from her mother.

When she closed the door behind her, however, and saw who the "neighbor" was, her heart failed her again. She could not speak. She stood and looked at him, pale as death, and trembling in every limb.

The Colonel was a little frightened. He had intended to be very courteous, but, at the same time, very distant, in order that the young lady might not presume too far upon his condescension in noticing her. But when he saw that pale, beautiful face, his stateliness vanished like frost before the morning sun. He came forward, took her hand, and led her to a seat with the tenderest care.

"My dear Miss Grant, I shall never forgive myself for agitating you in this way," he said, gently. "I ought to have known that the sight of me could only bring the most disagreeable recollections to your mind."

"Oh no, Sir," faltered Valeria.

She had just sense enough left to keep her from asking after George. Perhaps it would have been better for her in the end if she had done so. But she looked at him as if she was wondering why he came. The Colonel began to wonder too. What on earth would she say if she knew that he had made the journey from London only to call on her? Why, that he was mad, to be sure! It would never do to let her know the truth about his visit; and so he fabricated a fib upon the spot, with a celerity that could only have been acquired by long practice in that fashionable art.

"I was obliged to come down into Hampshire on business," he said. "The evening before I left town, I happened to be riding through Brompton, and I saw your little sister in the door of your father's house. I inquired after you, and, hearing you were staying here, I thought, as I was to pass through W—, that I would call and pay my respects to you."

"You are very kind," said Valeria, feeling as if she should like to pull Maria's ears soundly for her officiousness.

"Not at all, my dear young lady. To tell the truth, I was very anxious to see you again, and to tell you how pleased I was with your conduct—in—in that lamentable affair."

She was perfectly silent, but he saw that she turned pale at the allusion.

"It cannot be a pleasant subject for you to dwell upon; and you will pardon me for alluding to it in any way, I am sure. But I feel that I must have appeared in a most unfavorable light before you at that time. I assure you, if it had been possible to secure your happiness in the way you wished, I would have left no stone unturned in your cause; but we were all in a most awkward dilemma. The only thing we could do was, to get out of it as honorably as possible. I fear it caused you much suffering; I regret that deeply. I would far rather have borne the pain myself, than that you, so young and so good, should have had it laid upon you."

Valeria felt grateful for his kindness, but she was literally afraid to speak, lest she should burst into tears.

"I see," he said, with a sad smile; "I am a

sort of grim old executioner in your eyes, and you will never forgive me for the part I was forced to play that morning."

"You mistake me, Sir," she said, with a violent effort to appear calm. "I knew then that you were sorry for me. You were obliged to take the part of your niece against me, and it was quite right that—that Mr. Monair should marry her. I have nothing to blame you for."

"Then you quite forgive me? I shall not feel at ease till you have said 'Yes' to that question."

"If I have anything to forgive, most certainly."

"And we are friends?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Shake hands, then."

She gave him her hand. The Colonel must certainly have been losing his head, for, not content with a gentle pressure, he raised it to his lips. And Vallie blushed, and her blue eyes sparkled through their coming tears. It was a sort of triumph to have the uncle paying this homage to her, deceived and deserted as she had been by the nephew. She did not even withdraw her hand when he seemed inclined to keep it. And so they sat side by side; the old man's heart beating fast; the young girl's eyes fixed upon the floor. I wonder what George Monair would have said if he could have looked in upon the group just then?

A tremendous debate, a hard struggle, was going on in the Colonel's mind at that moment. He was sorely tempted to do a very foolish thing, i. e., to make love to this pretty girl whose white hand rested so quietly in his.

This was really what he had come to Hampshire for, though he would have been angry enough if any one had told him so twenty-four hours previously! Should he go back without accomplishing the object of his journey, simply because he feared the laugh of a few heartless people who knew him, and called themselves the "world"? What did he care for the world? It had never used him so well that he need defer to its opinion now. Besides, he had seen quite enough of it, and with a beautiful young wife at his side, would be quite as well pleased if the "world" would keep its distance. So the die was cast, and the determination taken. If Valeria would consent, she should be his bride!

Through all this long silence he had held her hand. But now he dropped it. She looked up, and catching his breath, he plunged gallantly into the waves of doubt—perhaps of despair.

"I am going to talk to you frankly, my dear," he said, "and I want you to be equally frank with me. Will you tell me—honestly, mind—if you have quite got over that affair with my nephew?"

The poor Colonel! As if the most transparent woman that ever breathed could answer such a question sincerely. Of course, Valeria replied that she had quite got over it.

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"And you do not regret that he is married; you do not envy Isabel?"

Valeria smiled slightly. No, she did not envy Isabel. She said that honestly enough; for she knew pretty well, in her own heart, what sort of a life Isabel's must be; and she would rather be a galley-slave, chained to the oar, than obliged to live that life herself.

"Your heart is then quite free?" observed the Colonel.

"Entirely free," replied Valeria, with a blush.

She began to see in which way the conversation was tending, and already her brain was racked with two questions: "Shall I?" or "Shall I not?"

"They talk a great deal about a first love" the Colonel continued. "I have known some men go so far as to say that they would never marry a woman who had loved any one before them. They must be arrant simpletons if they believe what they preach. How can they tell who has loved and who has not? People don't live in this world for sixteen or seventeen years without using their eyes and finding out that they have hearts; and, for my part, I think no worse of a woman for having had two or three

fancies, even before she marries. I could not expect that you, for instance, would have remained till now, waiting for my coming, without a thought in your little head of any one else on earth. But if I came at last, and said: 'Will you be my wife?' I should expect you to say 'No,' unless you knew and felt that every other fancy was quite over and gone, and that you were sure you could be true in thought as well as in deed to me. Do you understand me?"

She did not entirely. She could not say whether he had positively made her an offer or not, and to decline, or accept, or to say anything which might seem to imply that she intended doing either, would be awkward in the extreme. The Colonel was a little nettled by her silence.

"Surely you must know if that fancy is over or not, since you told me, not ten minutes ago, that your heart was entirely free. I would not have gone so far if I had dreamed you cared for my nephew in the least."

"I do not care for him now," she murmured.

"That is right, my dear, quite right. He has forgotten the flirtation, too, if I may judge from his letter of a day or two ago."

He drew it from the breast-pocket of his coat as he spoke; then remembering how Valeria was alluded to in its pages, was about to put it back in some confusion, but she held out her hand for it, saying, naturally enough:

"May I see it? I shall be only too glad to know that he has forgotten me?"

"Well, take it. Perhaps it will vex you; but it only shows how fickle young men are. If you want a man to love you truly, my dear, wait till he is fifty, and you will not be disappointed in his affections or his fidelity."

She did not hear a word he was saying. Her eyes were fixed upon that fatal letter, upon the graceful handwriting which she knew so well! Oh! bygone days! when to see that precious handwriting would send her blushing to her room, that in silence and solitude she might kiss the characters, and dream of the beloved writer! And now, after long and weary weeks of suffering, of estrangement, and of absence, she held a letter in her hand again. And, oh! how did it speak of her who had loved him so!

If the Colonel fancied that she would change color, or shed tears, or even faint at reading these cruel words, he was disappointed. She merely crushed the letter in her hand, and sat gazing sternly at the floor. He had not the slightest idea of all she was thinking and feeling as he began to talk again.

"You see that he has quite forgotten you, my child."

"Yes, I see."

"His love was too warm to last. I thought so at the time, though I would not pain you by saying so. Well, let that pass. He can be nothing more to you, of course. But, if another wished to be all to you, Valeria, what would you say?"

"I do not understand," she said, putting her hand to her head, with a weary, bewildered look.

"If I, for instance, wished to fill his place, and be to you all that he never can be, would you consent?"

"You wish me to marry you?" she said, turning, and looking at him steadily.

"I do."

"You remember that I am poor, that I am only a greengrocer's daughter?"

"I remember all that."

"You understand that when I marry I will not give up my family, as so many women do. The man who is ashamed to let my father, my mother, my sister, and my brothers enter his house, though it were a duke's palace, can never be my husband?"

"They shall always be welcome and honored guests in my home, Valeria, if you will only consent to share it."

"You are very generous, very kind; but there is one thing more. I told you that my heart was free, and so it is. But it seems to me that it is dead. I could be very grateful to you,

I could be true to you and kind, but I fear I could not love you as a wife should love her husband."

"I do not expect that from you just yet; but I think in time my own fondness will bring a return and a reward. If you give me gratitude, and truth, and kindness at the first, I shall be quite content to wait patiently for the rest. Now, which is it to be? Yes or no?"

She sat for a few moments in silence. She knew well that on her decision rested his future and her own. Every consideration was for him: only one was against him. If she said "yes", she won rank, wealth, a happy home, and a loving heart to keep her company there, at one stroke. So much for the affirmative side of the question. On the negative, there was but one solitary argument, and that, look at it as she might, seemed a very ludicrous one. If she married him, she would be the aunt of George Monair!

"Well," said the Colonel, once again, "am I to have this little hand or not?"

She laid it mutely in his own.

"I will try and make you happy, Sir," was all the promise she made to seal that strange betrothal.

But the Colonel wanted nothing more. With his lips pressed upon those white fingers, he had gone straight into a "Fool's Paradise", which lasted, luckily, long after the light of his honeymoon had waxed and waned!

CHAPTER XX.

"Five months ago, the stream did flow,
The lilies bloomed within the sedge,
And we were lingering to and fro,
Where none will track thee in this snow—
Along the stream, beside the hedge.
Ah! sweet, be free to love and go!
For if I do not hear thy foot,
The frozen river is as mute,
The flowers have died down to the root.
And why, since these be changed since May,
Should thou change less than they?"

—ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

This strange and sudden wooing was not kept a secret very long. Valeria returned to Brompton within the week, and the Colonel made his appearance that very evening to "kiss hands", and to be acknowledged by his new relations. To tell the truth, they were all delighted to welcome him in his new character, all with one exception. That exception took the shape of the young Maria. She had revoked the too hasty judgment which stigmatized the colonel as a horrid old man on the first occasion of their meeting, but she was by no means prepared to see him in his nephew's place—a lover, and a lover of Valeria's. Maria had read many a romance, but never one that ended in so unromantic a fashion as her sister's was about to do. And she expressed her opinions upon the subject in terms more forcible than elegant, when she and Valeria retired for the night. Valeria listened in silence, as she sat by the window, and looked toward the roof of Alfred place, that sheltered no longer one beloved head.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," cried Maria. "I'd never go and love one man a month, and then marry his uncle! I should be ashamed to look any one in the face if I had done such a thing! It's only his money you are marrying, Valeria; you know that as well as I do!" Still no answer came. Maria went to bed in high dudgeon, but Valeria kept her watch till the moon rose high above her head. What was she thinking of as she gazed at the window where once a twinkling light had shone like love's kind guiding-star? What do we all think about when we pass the shrine after the idol is broken, when we shiver an instant over the empty hearth that was once bright and warm for us alone?

The preparations for the wedding went on merrily. I think old men speed their wooing more quickly than young ones. They cannot afford to wait so long; they are not so sure of life and health and strength as they were at twenty-five; and so, when happiness comes to them they grasp her at once, and will not let her go. So the aged bridegroom was as impatient as a child who expects a new toy; and his future mother-in-law, who could scarcely believe

in her daughter's good-fortune, was quite as eager as he.

"Two out of the same family, Vallie, is more than any young woman could reasonably expect. And so, as you have no objection to him, we'll strike while the iron is hot, and see you a lady in spite of that selfish, stuck-up little monkey in her turban hat, that took poor George away from you!"

Valeria acquiesced meekly; she was losing her appetite, her color, and her spirits; but her mother would not see that anything was the matter with her.

"She's a little nervous, my dear, that's all!" she said to her most intimate gossip, who ventured to hint at the change. "But then that's only natural. I'm sure I was so frustrated when I was going to marry Grant, that I scarcely knew whether I stood on my heels or my head. I was as nervous as a cat; and now look at me! When it is all over, you will see how bright and happy she will look. And I am sure she might eat gold if she liked; the Colonel dotes upon her so."

It was a dreary sort of business, after all. They all tried to make the best of it. Valeria, perhaps, tried harder than any one; but it was an evident failure, and no one could help seeing it, and feeling restless and dissatisfied in consequence. A thousand times a day did the Colonel wish his handsome young nephew at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, with a stone tied comfortably round his neck. Who will not sympathize with him? When a love is lost; when it is dead; when it is over and gone for ever, I should like to know what earthly business it has to rise, an unbidden ghost, at another man's bridal feast? That Valeria had ever loved George was a sufficient crime; but that she should so persistently remember him, was an offence not to be forgiven. And yet what reason had he to suppose that she did so? She never mentioned George's name; she never alluded to him in any way. Yet some tormenting little imp of jealousy whispered to the poor Colonel that this was not from forgetfulness, and led him an uneasy life in consequence. To add to his perplexities, the young couple returned from Paris just at this time, and he was in mortal terror lest George should, by any chance, find out what he was doing, and contrive some means of interfering with his happiness. But, as good luck would have it, Mrs. Monair was in the country, and they were obliged, perforce, to pay a short visit before settling down in the town house, which had been re-furnished for them, from top to bottom. The Colonel breathed freely again. During that brief interim, Valeria would become his own, and then he felt he could trust her, though a thousand Georges were at her feet.

So time went on, and at last it wanted but fourteen hours to that happy one which was to put an end to all his doubts and fears. He had spent the evening with Valeria, had bidden her a tender good-night; and now, in the solitude of his own room, was thinking of her grace, her beauty, her goodness, and how little he deserved them all. Tears were in his eyes, and something like a prayer trembled on his lips as he sank to sleep.

How did Valeria spend that night before the bridal? She went directly to her own room, after the Colonel had left the house. Maria was waiting for her there. No sooner did the door open than the provoking little monkey began to sing, with great emphasis and feeling:

"So they gave him my hand
Where my heart could never be,
And auld Robin Gray
Was a gude man to me!"

Perhaps, if she had given one look at her sister's pale and weary face, before she began the song, the words would have died upon her lips. At all events, she produced an effect upon which she had by no means calculated.

Whether it was a vision of the Auld Robin Gray to whom she was about to be linked for life, or of the "Jamie" who was still living, but no longer true, that rose before Valeria I cannot say. But she put down the lamp she carried, and sinking upon a chair, went into a strong fit of hysterics.

Maria, frightened almost to death, ran down to call her mother. Mr. Grant was dispatched for the doctor, and by twelve o'clock all was quiet once more. But all night long Maria heard her sister weeping by her side—sobbing and moaning, and now and then rising to walk the floor. The child never forgot those hours of misery and despair to her dying day. And all the consolation, all the sympathy, all the love she had to bestow, were lavished freely upon the sufferer; but all in vain. And when the morning came, Valeria was so pale and ghastly, that they seemed rather to be dressing a corpse for the coffin than decking a bride for the altar.

Mrs. Grant was shocked at her appearance; but she was a woman of expedients. It would never do to present such a face to the elated bridegroom, so she dispatched Maria on a secret errand to the nearest chemist's; and with the aid of a little rouge, made the poor pale cheeks bloom as brightly as they had ever done, when George Monair praised their roses.

One short hour, and all was over. There was no more time for change—no more room for regrets. The warp and woof of life were woven with sad and neutral tints, instead of bright, gay colors. Valeria could not help that! Nothing had gone with her as she had hoped, and wished, and believed it would do; and hoping, and wishing, and believing were all at an end, now that the ring was on her finger—now that she was the wife, not of George, but of Alfred, Monair.

Valeria had begged so earnestly that the marriage ceremony might be a private one, that the Colonel could not refuse so small a boon. Accordingly, very few of his friends or acquaintances knew that "old Monair" had taken upon himself the yoke matrimonial, and when such a rumor crept gradually about, they laughed it to scorn. His return to London, however, set the matter speedily at rest; for a handsome house was taken in one of the streets at the West-end, and the bride was visible to any one who might choose to call upon her.

Maria came. No secret had been made of Valeria's parentage. It was the wisest thing the Colonel could possibly have done, not to seem ashamed of the Brompton shop. Men admired him for his pluck, and still more for his good taste, after they saw Valeria; and the women could revenge themselves by sneers about cabbages and cauliflowers, in case she gave herself airs. But this she did not seem inclined to do. She met her guests with a quiet good breeding that astonished them; there was a kind of gentle deference in her manner as she conversed with ladies that seemed, without servility, to acknowledge the social difference between them; and though perfectly courteous to the gay young men of fashion who sometimes thronged her rooms, there was a little air of serious reserved dignity about her all the while, that taught them not to presume upon her position by the slightest look or word; and they did not. After parading their elegant forms and handsome faces before her for hours, without winning a single glance of admiration from those sad eyes, that seemed as if they were glancing beyond them to something far away, they took themselves off, wondering what it could all mean, and deciding, as other young men had done before them, that she "was cold as an icicle!" And the women, seeing that she neither intended to flirt with their husbands, nor entrap their sons, brothers, or lovers, rallied round her gallantly, and supported her through thick and thin, till she became as fashionable as her heart could wish.

In the meantime, how were our other turtle-doves progressing? The honeymoon—if there had ever been the faintest semblance of such a thing—was over, and Mr. and Mrs. George Monair were fairly launched, like other butterflies, upon the surface of their fashionable life. There were many rumors afloat concerning them; they resided together at the house in Halfmoon street; there was no visible separation—no open scandal, and they were both perfectly courteous and civil to each other when they were seen in public together. Yet Madam Ru-

mor said that George Monair was on the turf, that the gambling "hells" of the great metropolis were his favorite resorts, and that he was going to the dogs generally. Madam Rumor also hinted at an unrecognized establishment, a villa at St. John's Wood, whose occupant passed Isabel daily as she rode and drove in the park. Was all this true? And if so, how did Isabel bear it? For I am constrained to say that she was no woman to sit down patiently to be pitied by the world at large for a wrong like this. She would be far more apt to retaliate in kind, than to weep over her husband's iniquities. In fact, Madam Rumor added to the tale a whisper that Isabel had consoled, or was about to console, herself with the devotion of Captain Archney of the Guards; and certainly the gallant officer was somewhat assiduous in his attendance upon her. The world, of course, looked on and waited. So long as there was no glaring impropriety, nobody had any business to interfere. We may throw as many stones in private at our neighbors as we like, but for lapidation in public, we must wait till the voice of the public and of the law has condemned the culprit. Then—then, indeed, the faster the stones are thrown the better. Let no thought of our own private catalogue of sins, no remembrance of One who put judges and people alike to confusion by a single searching sentence, stay our hands!

Isabel was, at present, in no danger of this social condemnation, though those who anticipated it might think her so. She was too wise, too wary, to be caught in any snare. What the relation between her and the Captain might be only they two could say; but if they had a secret, they certainly kept it well. Even the jealous watch of her husband could discover nothing wrong, and gradually it ceased. He seemed content, like the rest of the world, to wait till her own folly should precipitate the discovery, if there was one to be made.

Marriage had robbed Valeria of some of her charms, by investing her with a dignity that forbade the smallest attempt to win admiration from any except her husband. Marriage, on the contrary, had gifted Isabel with many a new attraction. Men who had "fought shy" of her while she was single, now crowded around her wherever she went, and were surprised at the wit, grace, and beauty of a woman they had so long overlooked. She gloried in this admiration, she reveled in it. Her position was secured; she could do and say things now, which six months before would have stamped her as "fast"; and since not one of the men who followed in her train could flatter himself that she wished to entrap him, she made use of smiles and glances and blushes enough to drive a battalion to despair. She was not artful—she was not affected—she was simply a handsome woman, who knew how to make the most of her good looks, and who played with her admirers as a cat plays with a mouse. The pretty girls, who had been her companions, and helped themselves to lovers, while she remained unsought and unwon, now suddenly found the tables turned upon them. For every slighting look, for every pitying smile they had given her in days gone by, Isabel paid them back in their own coin. She would come late to a ball, where they came early; she would sail up the room, cool, fresh, and beautiful, while they were looking flushed and heated by the dance. She would wear black only, relieved with a knot or two of deep blue ribbon, while they were decked in all the colors of the rainbow; she would keep their lovers and husbands hanging around her chair, and eye their ill-concealed rage and vexation with a cool, provoking smile. In short, there was no end to the tricks she played, and no bounds, I fancy, to the hatred with which these fair creatures regarded her. Still, so long as a woman behaves herself properly, you cannot turn her out of society, because she is more beautiful or more fascinating than you yourself are. And there was nothing left for the ladies but to submit and to wait for the day when she should publicly disgrace herself, and so give them an opportunity of paying off their very long scores. They waited very impatiently, I can assure you.

It is not to be supposed that Isabel had remained all this time in utter ignorance of her uncle's misdemeanors. No; if you commit matrimony in London, there is no necessity to proclaim it from the housetops; the very sparrows seem to aid in spreading the fact abroad; especially if you have any private reasons of your own for wishing to keep it somewhat quiet. The Colonel and his bride, I suppose, had no such reasons, for as soon as they returned to town, Isabel found a kind little note on her dressing-table, accompanied by a handsome present, in the shape of a diamond bracelet, and a card for an evening party at the house of her new aunt.

For a moment she was literally struck dumb with astonishment. Recovering herself, however, she burst into a hearty fit of laughter, and taking the card, the letter, and the bracelet, she ran down into the breakfast-room. Mr. Monair and his mother were already seated at the table; Isabel took her place at the side, and, after eating an egg and drinking a cup of coffee, began her attack.

"I have just had a note from the Colonel," she said to her mother, in her gentlest tones.

"Indeed! I thought he was out of town."

"He has been, but he has returned."

"And when will he be here?"

"I cannot tell," said Isabel, quietly. "His time seems to be fully occupied just now."

Master George pricked up his ears, and turned toward her with a look of interest.

"By-the-by, Isabel, I heard a most ridiculous report last night at the club. It is astonishing what lies people are at the trouble of inventing, when they have nothing else to do."

"And what lies have they been telling now, George?" she said.

"Why, they positively had the impertinence to assure me that my uncle was married! As if he would—eh?—what are you laughing at, Isabel?"

"It is so ludicrous, George. Why the Colonel is married!"

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Monair, aghast.

"Stuff and nonsense, Isabel!" said George, sitting uneasily in his chair. "How can you believe everything that people tell you. The Colonel was not born yesterday, my dear. It would take a remarkably shrewd woman to put the noose over his head, I can promise you."

"All men are Solomons till they meet the woman whose mission it is to make a fool of them," said Isabel, shaking her head. "The Colonel has met him."

"You must be joking."

"There is his confession in his own 'hand of write,'" she said, pointing to the note. "No, you must not read it—I allow no one to read my letters. But it is a fact that he is married, and here is an invitation to his house for the 27th, and a diamond bracelet, which he has sent for me to wear on that eventful occasion. I am sure I don't care if he marries twice a week, provided he sends me a handsome present each time."

She held the bracelet up to her mother's admiring eyes. George scarcely looked at it.

"Hang the diamonds!" he said, sourly. "If my uncle has made an idiot of himself, I should like to know more about it. Pray, what is the lady's name? I wish he had asked my advice about the matter. I could have given him some hints about the joys of matrimony that would have made him hesitate before he entered into that holy state, I think."

"Yes, George," said Isabel, with a sweet smile; "but then every one, you know, has not your peculiar blessing. Every man has not the memory of a little greengroceress to trouble his repose, as you—"

"Mrs. Monair!" said George, coloring vividly, "there are some names I will not bear spoken lightly, and that is one."

"Why, I thought you asked me her name," said Isabel, with an air of innocence.

"Whose name?"

"Our new aunt's, George."

"Good heavens! what do you mean, Isabel?"

"The Colonel's wife is very young, George. Very pretty, too; and she has blue eyes and black hair, and a very distinguished air, and the

things that she does wear, they make her fine and fair—and they are a happy pair—"

"Bell, stop a vile doggerel, or I shall go mad!" exclaimed Mr. Monair, starting suddenly from his seat. "Who has the Colonel married?"

"Vile doggerel, indeed! My only attempt at wooing the tuneful Nine to be stigmatized in that manner. Well, never mind! neglected genius can always console itself with the contemplation of its own unappreciated merits."

"Will you tell me, woman?"

"Well! yes, I am a woman. Thank you for reminding me of the fact. And the Colonel's wife is a woman, too; and her name is Valeria Grant—or, rather, it is now Valeria Monair!"

George sat down as if he had been shot.

"It is a lie!" he groaned.

"Thank you!" said Isabel, with a look of fierce contempt and hatred. "I have been called a 'woman', and told to my face that I am a liar! You coward! If I was only a man I would fight you! I'll fight you now! There are some revolvers up stairs; get them, and I'll show you if you can insult me with impunity, because that baby-faced girl has married a man old enough to be her grandfather. I hate her! I hate you! I hate every one! Get the pistols, George, and let us make an end of it. Then you can shoot the Colonel afterward, and marry his widow, you know."

"Bell, my child! Do you know what you are saying?" said Mrs. Monair, laying her hand upon her arm.

"Great nonsense, I suppose," replied Bell, glancing at her husband, who sat with his face hidden by his hands, and had not heard one word she had uttered. Presently he rose and left the room, with an uncertain, staggering step. Bell glanced after him, bit her lip, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, what is to be will be! I cannot prevent it, and so I will eat, drink, and be merry!" And she sat down again with great composure to another cup of coffee, a plate of delicate buttered toast, a rasher of breakfast bacon, and the morning paper. Isabel was certainly becoming a sensible woman very speedily.

CHAPTER XXI.

And so Isabel and her husband went to the little party on the twenty-seventh? Of course. There is nothing like getting these awkward meetings over as speedily as possible, and both ladies, I fancy, felt immensely relieved when the olive-branch had been fairly tendered and accepted.

Isabel and Mrs. Monair were among the first to grace the festive walls within their presence. They greeted Valeria with a kindly courtesy that showed her that by-gones were to be by-gones, and that, whatever might have been her faults as Miss Grant, Mrs. Monair was to be considered their equal and their friend. Much flattered by this condescension, she received her other guests with a heart at ease, and was able, later on, to watch at her leisure the proceedings of George's wife. They were somewhat peculiar; they made her open her blue eyes wider than ever, and feel for a moment thankful that George himself was not there to see. For, as I have always said, Isabel had "suffered a sea change", that had transformed her from a cold, silent, and almost unattractive girl, into a fascinating, bewitching, brilliant, and perfectly heartless flirt! Never shone sun or moon upon a more dangerous one. Clad in a robe of dark-blue silk, her beautifully-molded neck and arms bare; a single diamond, blazing like a star, above her forehead; a single white rose nestling in the folds of her corsage—that was all; and yet enough to bewitch the throng that hovered continually about her. Every motion was grace itself. Every attitude had the royal dignity of a princess, or the lovely ease of a pretty child; every bend of that white neck was swan-like; every glance of those dark eyes thrilled the heart of him on whom they, for the moment, turned. To this one she talked, upon that one she smiled, and a third received a shy expressive glance; one held her fan, another her bouquet, another still, picked up the cloud-like handkerchief, redolent of delicate perfume, that fell at her feet; and when one of the number,

more fortunate than the rest, whirled away with her in the waltz, looking down into those bewildering eyes, and encircling that perfect form with his trembling arm, the rest stood apart, eyeing him with jealousy, angry glances, that puzzled Valeria more than anything else. Why should a married woman, married to the man of her choice, seek for admiration so degrading as this?

It may be that her looks expressed her thoughts almost too plainly; for Isabel rested from the waltz upon the sofa she occupied, and, when they were alone, said quietly:

"You have honored me with a great deal of attention this evening, for which I should feel flattered if I did not know its cause so well. You never liked—you never had reason to like me. And now you despise me! Perhaps I despise myself. Perhaps I feel that I was born for better things; it may be that I once hoped and expected to be a better woman than I ever can be now!"

"I should have thought," said Valeria, gently, "that you at least would not care for such things. The homage of one true heart surely ought to suffice—"

She could not finish the sentence, for Isabel began to laugh.

"You are alluding to my marriage—to my love-match," she said. "My dear, the moon never shone on such a fool as I was then! You were wiser. One may marry for rank, for wealth, for position, but for love—bah!" She glanced at her wedding-ring; at her distant group of admirers; at Valeria, and swept away. Valeria gazed after her with new and painful interest.

"She is not happy; I knew she would not be," ran her thoughts, as she talked politely to a dowager on her left. "But she is worse than unhappy; she is desperate; she is in the mood for doing something rash. I wonder where he is, and what he thinks of it all."

From the whirl of the giddy dance, and the velvet-clad dowager at her side, her thoughts went wandering persistently back to George Monair. She had changed toward him far more than she knew. There had been a memory of him connected at first with every action of her daily life. By degrees that passed away. And the life itself, so far as love was concerned, grew to resemble one of those placid "tarns" we sometimes see among the Scottish hills, mirroring the blue sky and the little flowers that grow upon their banks, undruffled by adverse breezes, unshaken by adverse storms, but always still, and quiet, and peaceful—so peaceful that the weary traveler flings himself down beside them, and almost longs to breathe his life out there! To know no anxious days, no sleepless nights; to sigh no more, to weep no more, to rest and to be at rest; this was what Valeria had gained, although she knew it not.

Some faint shadow of the truth may have dawned upon her, when, looking up from that reverie, she saw the object of it standing by her side. He had come late—he waited for her greeting, without daring to expect a kind one, and the eyes of his uncle, of his mother, and his wife were upon them both. To the surprise of all, Valeria rose, shook hands with him kindly, made a few remarks as quietly as if he had been a perfect stranger, and, letting him pass on, resumed her seat and the conversation with her venerable neighbor, with the most perfect composure. Only four of the guests knew how imminent had been the danger of "a scene." Mrs. Monair congratulated herself inwardly that all had passed off so well. Isabel bit her lips, and wondered whether the woman was a hypocrite or a fool. She inclined to the latter opinion, as being the most charitable one. As for the Colonel, but for the place and the people, I think he would have rushed across the room and knelt at her feet, to thank her for her admirable behavior; and yet it was no particular merit of hers—the change was one which she did not make—one over which she had no control.

The George Monair of to-day was not what the George Monair of yesterday had been. On the day of her marriage, his image had probab-

ly been most vivid in her mind. For in the last look which we give to anything we once have loved, there must always be some little twinges of heartache. That he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting, was nothing at that moment. She was only conscious that she was losing him, and with him, all the hope and faith in life and in humanity that made earth beautiful.

It was her last weakness, and it came and went in a moment. Before the final words of the service were uttered, she was calm and composed. The cup had been bitter, but it was drained at last, and to the very dregs. Come what might, of sorrow or of grief, Valeria Monair could never feel a pang like that again! And here was the hero of her romance once again before her!

She was rather silent the rest of the evening, though her guests were gay enough. She looked now and then at the face that had once charmed her so. It was strange how great an alteration those few short months had made. Handsome he was still, but it was a kind of animal beauty that could not please her eye. He looked flush and dissipated. His eye had a glance from which she shrank—his mouth an expression which she could not tolerate. She saw him once that evening standing by her husband's side, and she thought the Colonel showed far greater advantage than his nephew.

So, my dear readers, if you have been looking forward to this inevitable meeting, with an expectation or a fear of something evil resulting therefrom, you see that you will be disappointed. Valeria was safe so far as George Monair was concerned. Had she never met him again, he would have lived in her memory as a beautiful dream, too sacred, and still too dear, for the eyes of the world to gaze upon. But if we wish to keep up the illusions of girlhood, till old age comes upon us, we should never in after life meet those who shared the illusions with us. Experience lifts the magic veil of romance from our eyes for ever.

Freedom in one direction presupposes slavery in another, you will say. I am glad to confess, that this rule held good in Valeria's case. She knew well, as she glanced at those two men, which was the dearest. Her husband, by his kindness, had won, just as his nephew by his selfish weakness had lost her heart. She ran every risk of becoming a faithful Joan to the Colonel's Darby; she was altogether likely to make a good and affectionate wife if she was let alone.

How did Isabel like the promise of such simple happiness—such domestic bliss? Not very well—if one might judge from the frown with which she was regarding the pair and her own husband from under her dark brows!

But while the heroine was so calm and unmoved, what of the hero?

A more lonely, desolate man, I think, never existed. He lingered for an hour in the rooms, after that brief interview with Valeria, and then, making his way through the crowd, he stepped out on the balcony that overlooked the garden, and sat there in silence. The balcony was in the deepest shadow, but the moon above the house shone down into the garden with a tender light. He was alone—scarcely knowing whether he most belonged to the shadowy existence behind him, or to the harder world, whose dawn, in climbing up the eastern sky, must never find him there! Oh! the pain of that hour—the certain anguish with which he brooded over the treasure he had lost! Wealth, and youth, and health were his, but "the children of Alice" would "call Bertram father"—and what could life be worth to him, deserted and despised?

As he sat in that gloomy reverie, the curtained window opened, and a light step crossed the balcony. It was Valeria! So near him—yet never seeing—never dreaming that he was there! He watched her silently, for he felt too wretched, too lost, and weak and despairing, to speak just then.

She stood a few moments gazing at the sky. She sighed heavily. Once he thought he heard her sob, but he saw her face the next moment, and it was calm, though very pale. She trifled

with a spray of fuchsia from her bouquet—she raised it thoughtfully to her lips. At last she laid it down upon the balcony's edge, and went away. It was his favorite flower. Was she thinking of that? He stole softly from his hiding-place, and secured the blossom with a trembling hand. Something sparkled in the moonlight upon its drooping leaves. It was a tear! He hid it next his heart—it may be that he cherishes its faded and ruined beauty even yet!

Surely, here was material enough, even for the malice of an Isabel Monair, to lay the foundation of future misery upon!

CHAPTER XXII.

"To see her is to love her,
And love but her for ever;
For nature made her what she is,
And ne'er made sic anither."

—HUMPHREY.

We all seem to have our good and our bad angels as we go through life, and, and, what is worst and best for us is this, that they generally appear in some tangible human shape, to tempt or to guide us, as the case may be. Now, the white wings fan our tired eyes, now the black ones spread their gloomy shadow o'er the way. And too often, I fear, the good angel has to make way for the bad one, not only in our lives, but in our hearts, and in the affections that should be dedicated to better things.

Valeria was more fortunate than most of us; for though Isabel would gladly have played the part of her bad angel, just at this time, a counteracting influence was at work the while which she loved far better.

Colonel Monair had a married cousin residing in Eton square, to whom Valeria had felt drawn from the very first. Not all the distinctions of birth and wealth could keep those two kindred souls apart. And ere long the young bride knew all the wife's sad story, and loved and revered her the more for it.

In fact, it was difficult for the most hardened heart to resist the gentle influence of Catherine Moore, since her long life of sorrow had only taught her, through sympathy, the surest way to every sinning and suffering soul that brought its burden to her feet.

From their first meeting, Mrs. Moore had taken an almost painful interest in the young girl. The Colonel's joy, and Valeria's apparent content, could not deceive her. She saw that something was wrong, and she watched them both narrowly whenever they were together. Were those two doomed to belong to the long list of fashionable married couples who only saw each other once or twice a week? Would magnificent diamonds, and a carriage, and a box at the opera, atone for the loss of domestic happiness, or hide from the prying eyes of the world the lonely hearthstone, and the aching hearts that should have been happy beside it?

She knew better, and yet she dared not speak her thoughts. For a long time Valeria was silent and reserved upon the subject, even with her. But chance enlightened Mrs. Moore by giving her a clue to the look of sadness and weariness she had sometimes seen in Valeria's eyes, and she would not let the occasion pass by unimproved. They were standing one evening together in Mrs. Moore's conservatory, looking back into the lighted ball-room they had just left. Valeria saw the eldest daughter of her hostess, a lovely girl of sixteen, waltzing past their quiet nook. She threw her a kiss. Mary nodded gayly as she whirled away, the very goddess of the dance. The band was playing that lovely air to which the Princess Sophie waltzed while Strauss stood looking on. Valeria leaned against the window, and kept time to the measure as she looked at the dancers.

"Poor Strauss!" she said, gently.

"Strange, is it not?" replied Mrs. Moore, "how many of our heart-histories are alike. From Heloise down to Strauss, from Strauss to Valeria, it is one and the same thing—a lost love that spoils and saddens all."

Valeria started violently.

"Mrs. Moore, what can you mean?"

"Ah! my dear child, I know all. I heard your story quite by accident, and it will never

pass my lips again. But you will let me give you one little word of advice, for I am old enough to be your mother as well as Mary's. My dear child, what is past is past, and sorrowing will never mend it. And after all, it matters but little if our fondest wishes are granted us or not, since every pleasure offered us in heaven so far transcends them. There are many joys I am content to lose here, many sorrows I am ready to bear, when I think of the country where I am going, where so many I have loved have already gone; where I shall one day meet them all, I hope, and know and love them as I have done on earth, only far better—far better!"

Valeria was silent. To her it seemed a dreary life, with so much of real sorrow, and only that one faint, dream-like hope to compensate for it.

"You do not agree with me," said Catherine, with a sweet, sad smile. "The things of this world are more present to you, just now, than the things of the next. But is it wise, Vallie? Is it kind to your good husband, this continual dwelling on a love you have lost, and which you ought now to forget?"

"You mistake me, said Vallie, blushing deeply. "One cannot forget, perhaps, at once; but I respect my husband; I am grateful to him for having placed so many pleasures within my reach. As for love—ah! I have already found out that love is not everything in this world. Many other things can make people happy; and I almost feel, at times that, if it was possible for me to love again—oh! I have suffered too much. My heart shrinks and trembles at the thought of another wound, and at the memory of the one I have already felt."

"I am glad to hear you say that, my dear," replied Catherine, kissing her. "When it has become a pain to remember, we are glad to learn to forget. And now let us go back and join your husband in the music-room."

From that night Mrs. Moore felt less anxious about Valeria. Then came the dreaded meeting with the early love, to set her heart entirely at rest. If she had wished for further information, she had it a few weeks later, when the Colonel was suddenly laid upon a sick bed, and Valeria assumed her place as nurse, and watched by his side.

The illness was not only sudden, it was also dangerous; and at one time it seemed as if it must be fatal. If ever any one had felt inclined to doubt the attachment of the young wife, they could scarcely have done so when they saw her sitting, so pale, so anxious, and so wretched, beside what she feared was her husband's dying-bed. The crisis came at last. The house was hushed to the deepest silence, the hours dragged their slow length along; but the breathing of the sick man grew easier, and Valeria and the physicians exchanged a glance of hope as the day began to break. Just as the first streak of light was tinging the eastern sky, the Colonel opened his eyes, looked at them both, smiled faintly, and sank again into a placid slumber, which was the welcome herald of his recovery.

"Saved! saved!" said Valeria, softly; and kissing the poor pale hand that lay so nervelessly upon the counterpane, she hurried from the room in a passion of tears. Till all danger was over, she had not felt what it would have been to lose him! In that hour, the husband rescued from the grave was far nearer to her heart than her first lover, in all the flush of youth, and health, and beauty had ever been. The Colonel could not have done a wiser thing than to fall ill. For Valeria's heart—like that of every other woman—kept its gates shut, it may be, while the besieger was unhurt; but, once wounded, faint, and dying, the vanquished victor saw them fly asunder—felt himself brought gently into the fairest chamber of the stubborn castle, and cherished there like a dear and long-expected guest. Yes, thank God! whatever may be the faults of woman, she has this virtue: that sickness and suffering never ask her aid in vain. Even the savage women were kind to the "poor white man" who lay sick in their village; and the most warlike Amazon that ever donned coat of mail would, I think, after the fury of the battle was over,

dress, with the gentlest care, the wounds which her own sharp sword had made. The aching head and aching heart may rest alike on woman's gentle breast, and hope to find relief. It is her hand that must comfort—her voice that must soothe—her foot that must go to and fro upon its weary, ceaseless round—her eyes that must watch and wake and weep. For the sake of this one attribute of the gentlest and most untiring sympathy—to which every man owes more than he can say, if he would but speak the truth—I think we should forgive her many a minor fault and sin. But men are proverbially ungrateful; and not one in a hundred, I dare say, after these gentle ministrations are over, remembers the self-sacrificing kindness of the minister. Perhaps, if the Colonel had been a younger man, he would have forgotten it, too. As it was, it touched him immensely. If the Colonel had loved Valeria before, he almost worshiped her after his recovery. And she, on her part, had grown quite fond of him.

The months that followed were most happy ones. If those who saw them together in society wondered, almost audibly at times, why she had married him, they need only have followed her to her quiet home to discover the reason. The devoted love that encircled her there, the kind face that met her eyes each hour in the day, the ready hand that never could do enough for her comfort, the faithful heart that never deceived her, though she placed her whole trust in its fidelity—these things formed the hidden charm that won and kept her true—that made her, though no longer a bride, the desire and joy of her husband's heart, as she was the light and ornament of his happy home?

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I think that love is like a play
Where tears and smiles are blended,
Or like a faithless April day
Whose shine with shower is ended.
Like Colnbrook pavement, rather rough,
Like trade exposed to losses,
And like a Highland plaid, all stuff,
And very full of crosses."

—PRAED.

What a pity it is that when people are really as comfortable, as happy, and as good as any one can reasonably expect to be in this world, they should not be let alone in their contentment, their felicity, and their goodness. It seems rather hard, if A has made up his or her mind to walk in the straight and narrow path of virtue and respectability, that B should want to push him or her out of it at once. Yet, generally speaking, this is the case. People are not let alone to be good in this world; if they are good at all, it must be in spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil, not with or by them.

Take Valeria, for instance. I am sure no woman ever intended to do her duty more thoroughly than she. Take the Colonel, who fully meant to be the kindest, and most faithful husband in existence: they both got themselves into hot water, as you will see presently, in spite of their good intentions, and the earnest, honest way in which they carried them out. They got into trouble; they fell among thieves; they were wounded, beaten, stripped, and bruised.

Valeria seemed to have got her heart's desire. She had a beautiful home, where her lightest word was law; a husband whose whole existence was devoted to her; kind friends—kind, at least, as the whole world goes; and youth and health, and beauty into the bargain. What more could she want? Apparently nothing. If in her heart a wish lurked ungratified, no one was ever the wiser for it. She seemed to enjoy herself as gayly and as entirely as a happy child, that only knows the days are bright and pleasant; but never asks the reason why. I wish such a state of beatitude could have lasted longer, for her sake.

But the serpent had entered this Eden also. On all this peace and domestic happiness, Isabel Monair looked with jealous and envious eyes. I cannot tell why she hated Valeria, who was so gentle and so good. But she did hate her; and I do not think that Valeria grieved much about the matter. One of those sudden antipathies, which are so common, but which

no one can fully account for, had sprung up between them from the first moment of their meeting. Then Valeria carried off Isabel's lover; and Isabel rescued him in triumph, and married him under Valeria's very nose. In return, Valeria, by her marriage with the Colonel, disappointed Isabel in her expectations of a nice little property; and Isabel, by way of taking her revenge for all the old scores, was doing her best to sow dissension between the husband and the wife.

The sight of their happiness was worse than all the rest. Her own home was nothing than a place to eat, drink, and sleep in, both to her and her husband. She was buried in a whirl of fashionable engagements. George was at his club, at billiard rooms, at races, or at the villa in Regent's Park, where one person, at least, was always glad to see him. And the gallant Captain lounged in Isabel's drawing-room or opera-box; and the world looked on and smiled significantly the while!

This was not a pleasant state of things. Nor was it a safe or a respectable one. At last the Colonel took it into his wise old head to interfere, thereby making matters ten thousand times worse, as people who interfere invariably do. He talked seriously to George, who laughed openly in his face, and advised him to go and preach to Isabel. He took that advice, and read the lady a homily that nearly drove her wild.

The attack was made in his own drawing-room, and in the presence of his wife, who sat upon a low footstool at his knee, gazing into the fire, while the war of words raged on.

"You are making yourself the talk of London," cried the Colonel. "Every one is wondering at you!"

"Let them," said Isabel, bitterly.

"So I would, if you stood quite alone, for you are as headstrong, and obstinate, and ungrateful as a mule! But the honor of the family is in your hands; if you fall, that comes down with you."

"And pray what do you think I am going to do with the honor of the family?" said Isabel, furiously. "Why don't you go and talk to George about the honor of the family, too?"

"So I have," replied the Colonel, with unlucky candor. "And he referred me to you."

Isabel burst out laughing.

"Oh! you may laugh, but I assure you the thing is getting serious. Why, some of the men have actually made bets—"

"About what?"

The Colonel hesitated, and glanced at his young wife.

"I scarcely like to say before her."

"It is a pity to offend her innocent ears, I know," said Isabel, with the bitterest mockery in her look and tone. "Nevertheless, go on. I may know what bets have been made about me, I suppose?"

"About you and the Captain."

"Take them, Uncle Alfred, take them all. And I'll help you to make a good thing out of it—a better book by far than you had at the Derby last year."

The time had gone by when the Colonel could have relished a speech like this. Instead of laughing, as Isabel had half expected he would, not even a smile disturbed the iron gravity of his face; but he drew himself up, glanced at Vallie, and muttered something about being shocked. Isabel glanced at her too, and her beautiful lip curled.

"Oh! I see how it is, my pious uncle! Your teeth are drawn, and your claws are pared, and no wild animal is ever going to be allowed to scratch or bite in your presence any more. I'm agreeable; but, *O mon Dieu!* how bored you will be!"

"You have taken up the French fashion of swearing along with your French principles," sneered the Colonel.

"Now, don't abuse the French, because I adore them, and Paris, and everything that belongs to France. So do you in your heart."

"I—"

"Now, uncle dear, don't put yourself in a rage, or you will certainly have the gout. You

were going to observe that your Paris days are over, and we all know that. But, if the Jardin Mabille knows you no more—"

"Don't talk of the Jardin Mabille here, if you please."

"Ah! I forgot. We are all on our good behavior, we monkeys who have seen the world, before the monkey who has not! Colonel, my dear Colonel, how innocent you are!"

"Confound it! What do you mean, Isabel?"

"Nothing. Only I once read a fable about a certain wise shepherd, who took such good care of his neighbor's flocks, that the wolf got among his own, ate them all up, stoup and roup, before he knew it. It has a fine moral, that fable?"

"Good heavens, Isabel! Do you mean to drive me mad!" exclaimed the Colonel, who looked as if he was going to have a fit.

"On the contrary. And so, my gentle shepherd, farewell! Farewell, shepherdess!"

She made a sweeping courtesy, and glided from the room. The Colonel heard her laughing as she went, and ground his teeth with rage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It takes but a very small seed to produce a perfect fruit or flower; and we may do more mischief with one single word, spoken in a second of time, than years of human life have the power to undo. No one knew this better than Isabel Monair, else she would not have fired her parting shot so successfully during her retreat. The Colonel was at first enraged by her insinuation, and declared roundly that she should never enter his doors again. Isabel took her sentence of banishment very coolly, and went her own gay way, without paying any attention to his wrath. But the sting of her words could not be banished, and the words themselves were haunting him by night and by day. What could she have meant by her parable about the shepherd who watched other men's flocks, but left his own unguarded, while the wolf stole in? Such words could apply only to Valeria, to his own little ewe-lamb, for whom he would have laid down his life. Had Isabel seen or known anything which would justify such a hint?

It was, perhaps, an absurd query to make; for if he had taken the trouble to think for a few moments, he would have remembered that there was a very little portion of the day when Valeria was not in his sight. They occupied the same room; they breakfasted, lunched, and walked out together. If she rode in the park, or out on the country roads, his bay mare galloped steadily by her side; if she visited the theatre or opera, the Colonel was her most attentive cavalier. Under such circumstances, it would have been hard indeed for a woman to play tricks. But he forgot all that, as he mused upon Isabel's words, Isabel's sharp glance at his wife, Valeria's sudden blush and drop of the head, as she felt that glance. What could it have meant, but that there was something going on, known to those two, of which he was perfectly ignorant?

The plain truth was, that Isabel had been an unseen witness of that silent meeting on the balcony at Mrs. Moore's house. She knew that to Valeria it was an unknown meeting; but she hated her none the less for it. Poor Isabel! I confess I have the greatest pity for her. Constant companionship had robbed her idol of its charms. She did not love her husband, for he was indifferent, and she was proud. Still, he was her property, not Valeria's; and it stung her with a fresh anger and deeper hatred, to see how the old dream could influence him still—how the man who scarcely knew whether she was in the room beside him or not, could tremble and thrill at Valeria's unconscious approach—how the eyes that looked so coldly or so angrily at her, could grow moist with tears as they gazed upon a simple flower, which Valeria had held for a moment and then thrown carelessly away. It was not pleasant. I think no woman would have liked it any better than Isabel did.

But another woman might have wept and pined in secret. Isabel did neither. She sought

to revenge herself, and, in a measure, she succeeded; for she changed the Colonel from a frank, confiding lover into a jealous and suspicious husband. He began to watch his wife. Now, watching a wife is about one of the worst things a man can possibly do. Because, in the first place, if the wife is not a born idiot, she will infallibly find out that she is being watched; and, in the second place, when she has so found it out, she will either be utterly alienated from a husband who cannot trust her, or she will set her wits to work to give him a very good and sufficient reason for his jealousy. "Trust is not rust", as the old proverb has it. Trust disarms many a hand, and wins many a heart; but jealousy and suspicion are deadlier than the plague.

It was a thousand pities that some good friend had not been near at hand to whisper this little warning in the Colonel's ear. No such friend was found, and, between the pair who had once been so happy, a breach widened slowly day by day. Valeria was at first puzzled by her husband's behavior; then, when she learned its cause, thoroughly indignant. "Was it for this," she said to herself, "that I sacrificed my youth and my happiness to an old man?" She forgot, the while, that the sacrifice had been a purely voluntary one; that no one had forced her into the marriage she was regretting; that the Colonel had been there before her, to take or to leave, as she chose. But, when we are angry, we are never just; and one thing and another conspired to keep the flame alive in Valeria's breast for many a weary week. She felt hurt, aggrieved, and disappointed; she was weary of life, and more weary still of Colonel Monair. She grew ill, and dull, and lonely; she wanted some kind friend to pet, and pity, and condole with her. She had a true friend in Mrs. Moore; but she counseled submission and gentleness, and other things to which Valeria, in her state of excitement, could not possibly subscribe. So matters went on; and Valeria, brooding over them in her own heart, fancied but one course remained for her to take. She must leave her husband, since he no longer had faith in her.

She knew well that, if she took such a step the most of its disadvantages would remain with her. In England, a woman is always to blame. Public sympathy goes with the husband, no matter what he may have done, no matter what he may be; and public opinion stones the wife with stones, though she may be only freeing herself from a slavery she can no longer bear, in the place of flying with a lover from her duties and her lawful ties. But England is not the whole world; and Valeria knew that in other countries a home and a refuge would be open to her.

"Then let me end it all!" she cried aloud, in her misery. "Let me escape from this unhappy home; let me fly from this degrading espionage, and enjoy myself once more!"

She was as mad as a March hare, you will say. Of course she was; for, setting aside all other considerations, she had no visible means of support. She had been educated, like most English girls, in a very superficial manner. She could draw a little, paint a little, dance beautifully, and enter a room with ease and grace; but she was about as fit for a governess as the kitten playing with the pens upon my desk is fit for the chair of an Oxford don. She could sew well, and might, perhaps, have earned a scanty subsistence by making dresses for fine ladies at ruinously low prices; but that was the only armor she could buckle on in the hour of battle, that frail shining needle, the only sword that would fit her hand. So, obviously, the wisest course she could take was to stay quietly at home and make the best of circumstances; wait till the Colonel's jealous fit was over, and play the part of a patient Grizel all the while, no matter how tyrannical he might take it into his head to be.

In her saner moments she acknowledged this herself; but it was very hard to feel it when the chain tightened around her helpless hands; and just at this critical moment the tempter came.

Finding all other things failing her in her hour of need, the poor child bethought herself of the comforts of religion, and sought to apply their healing balm to her own bleeding wounds. She opened her heart and told her griefs to the pastor of the church which she was in the habit of attending. This might have been a wise plan had the clergyman's head been gray and his heart cold. But the Reverend James Francis was a handsome man of thirty, with the most beautiful dark eyes and hair, and the whitest teeth, and the sweetest smile; and many a damsel's heart had ached vainly as she gazed at the fascinating young clergyman in his reading-desk or pulpit. For my part, I think a handsome clergyman is a great mistake. How can one listen properly to a sermon while one's fancy is bewildered and taken captive by the speaker who delivers it? No; let none but the plainest men mount the pulpit; or, if the preacher cannot divest himself of his outward graces, let him preach from behind a screen, and be to his lady hearers, not a face or a form, but merely a voice—"a persuasive voice".

Had there been a screen in the church of St. Gerdule, I question whether Valeria would ever have made her confession to the Reverend James. As it was, she sought his presence, and asked for his advice, more frequently perhaps than was prudent. Understand me. Neither priest nor penitent had, I am very sure, the thought of a shadow of evil in their heads. But men are men, even though they be clergymen; and women are women, even if they be married, and thoroughly good. In the course of time, the priest began to feel uneasy if his penitent did not appear punctually at the hour appointed; began to think what a brute the Colonel must be to distrust so frank and so artless a creature; began to feel that she had lovely eyes, a perfect complexion, the softest of hair, and the sweetest of voices. While Valeria, on her part, recalling his words of kindness, in the solitude of her own room, sometimes recalled the musical tone in which they were uttered; sometimes saw a pair of beautiful dark eyes meeting her own, sometimes felt a hand clasp hers, almost as warmly as if the fancy had been real. And then she would blush and sigh, and go on with her daily life, which had suddenly grown endurable, now that she had found a friend to sympathize with her in all griefs; a friend who was like a brother—nothing more—she said to herself a hundred times a day. For my part, I believe the tempter has not, in all his armory of weapons, one so fatal as a religious friendship, which borders, unconsciously to the friends, upon the verge of a profane love. And Valeria, thinking herself safe, had never been in so great danger—thinking herself exalted on high, had never been so near a terrible fall!

It was some weeks before Isabel discovered the charm that had rendered the young wife's existence more endurable. A slight rumor, floating over the surface of society, reached her at last. She took an early opportunity of watching Valeria and the Reverend James when they met, in her presence, at an evening party. One glance was enough. "Caught at last, and in my power!" she said triumphantly to herself, as she watched the unfortunate pair; and, figuratively speaking, she "jumped for joy!"

CHAPTER XXV.

To be thoroughly revenged upon an enemy, one must be patient, slow, crafty, watchful, and, above all, powerful. It is a hard part to play. For my part, I think I should prefer one good honest blow at my enemy—one half-minute's fair fight out in "the open", to a long and stealthy skulk behind the bush, from whence I could hit him with a deadlier aim and a more telling blow. To feel anger, to know hatred, is perfectly human. But surely it is better to hate a person thoroughly for five minutes and forgive him in another five, than to spend days, perhaps years, of life, watching him, entrapping him, body, bones, and all—as a crafty spider lies in wait for and devours a heedless fly. There is something so cold-blooded in the

very act of waiting and watching, that one shrinks instinctively from it.

But Isabel, strange to say, liked it. She was passionate and hasty enough when it suited her to be so; but she could disguise her anger most skillfully when occasion required. She liked a plot; she liked to angle for her trout before the sharp hook made it writhe in agony. Accordingly, when she saw that Valeria promised fair for "sport," she adopted a new line of conduct altogether. She called upon the Colonel; apologized for her rudeness; attributed it to anger; professed penitence; and promised to give the bone of contention—the gallant Captain—up. She was as good as her word, moreover, and the guardsman found himself summarily dismissed. I do not know that she deserved any great credit for this; since, if the truth must be told, she had grown heartily tired of him. And "they" did say, the very next season, that a certain foreign prince called rather more frequently in Half-Moon street than was necessary, or, perhaps, prudent. However, that is neither here nor there.

The Captain was sent about his business. Isabel was sorry and ashamed, or, at least, had the grace to pretend to be so; and the Colonel was delighted. They were often together, as in the days of old, when he was a bachelor and she a young lady on her promotion. She amused, she interested him, and, at last, she became his *confidante*, and heard all those doubts, and wonders, and suspicions of Valeria which he had never before breathed to mortal ear. She encouraged him in his system of espionage; she offered to help him, and, to give her all credit, did so effectually. One or two anonymous letters found their way to his club; he fancied that people looked with amused yet pitying eyes upon him; and Isabel sighed, and said that Valeria was foolish, and that the reverend pastor of St. Gerdule's was a very handsome and fascinating young man.

"Confound him! I'll punch his head, the sneaking puppy!" the poor Colonel used to cry. "And as for her, I'll shut her up, and feed her on bread and water, the ungrateful hussy!"

"Ungrateful, indeed!" chimed in Isabel. "Look where you took her from, and where you have placed her. But don't lock her up, Uncle Alfred. If we are wrong, and the world is wrong too, we shall only get laughed at for our pains. Try her with a little more liberty now, and see what she will do. I have an excellent plan."

Forthwith she proceeded to disclose it. The Colonel listened and hesitated. But she spoke of his honor, of his ancient name, of his age, and finally conquered. He left everything in her hand, and went "out of town" for a day or two, without informing Valeria of his intention. So, having her train laid, and her lighted match quite ready to apply, Miss Isabel sat and waited patiently till the proper time for the grand explosion should arrive.

It was not long in coming. Indignant as Valeria was at the Colonel's behavior, she felt their sudden estrangement very keenly. You may quarrel with all your friends, with all your family, and manage to rub on through life very comfortably, in spite of the separation. But you cannot quarrel with your husband or your wife without feeling it in every nerve of your body. Even if there be no love on your part toward the partner of your bed and board, even if the same roof never covers, if the wide ocean rolls between you, it makes no difference. There is the bitter pain, the aching sense of wrong and unfitness, the uneasy restlessness that can never end till reconciliation comes, or you lie quietly in your grave.

Valeria felt this deeply; and when her first impulse of anger at the Colonel's sudden and unannounced departure was over, she felt so miserable, so forlorn, so utterly forsaken, that it seemed to her she must lie down and die. Then came thoughts of one friend who was always kind to her; of one voice that was always ready to utter words that had the power to soothe her pain. No one was watching her; her husband had evidently given up all care for, or concern in her movements. When one door is shut, another generally stands open; when a woman's husband forsakes her, I am afraid there is almost always some one near at hand (provided she be even moderately good-looking and agreeable), to play the part of consoler and "faithful" friend. Of course, we all know what Valeria did. She went out quite early in the morning on foot, got into a four-wheeled cab, and drove straight to the Church of St. Gerdule. Isabel, who had been on the watch, saw this movement with a delighted smile;

and hurrying home, she dispatched Rosina, her maid, to some chambers in the Albany, which were all the "country" the poor Colonel had seen since he left his home.

There was a morning service at St. Gerdule's where altar cloths, screens, and unlighted wax candles, formed a prominent feature of the ceremonies. From this service, the Reverend Francis was retiring by a narrow garden-path that led from the church to the rectory-door. Once in the hall, a servant met him with the message that a lady wished to speak to him in his study. He walked leisurely toward the door, thinking of the only lady he felt the slightest wish to meet, opened it, and saw her there before him.

Valeria started up from her seat, and clasping the hand he extended, burst into a passion of tears. Her heart was so full that she could not help giving way; and, as she was one of the fortunate beings who can cry without distorting their lovely faces, or making their lovely eyes and noses red, the rector did not object in the least to the falling shower. He only held her hand in both his; felt strongly tempted to put his arm around her waist in addition; and waited till she could tell him what troubled her.

It came out at last—the wretched little story—in a very few words. She was tired of her life. She would endure it no longer. She would not tell her family of all she suffered, because they would suffer also. She had no one on earth to speak to, to confide in—except him, and would he show her some way out of such unhappiness, into something like the peace she used to know?

That was all. I think it was quite enough. Without any real thought of evil in their minds, these two young people stood on the brink of a pretty steep precipice, and scarcely gave its existence a thought. Valeria only felt that here was one safe and faithful friend—that here was a man with all the good qualities she had missed in her first love—a man who was as kind to her as ever that first love had been. While the poor rector only thought at that instant that he would give his life to see her happy in her home and at peace with her husband once again.

St. Senanus, we are told, avoided most successfully the pursuit of the enamoured Kathleen, however much he may have regretted her after her "eyes of most unholy blue" were closed in death—that death to which he doomed her. Had St. Senanus held Kathleen's hand in his for a quarter of an hour, his resolution might possibly have been shaken, and Kathleen might have escaped her watery bed. Our modern St. Senanus was not so wise as his predecessor. The touch of those slight fingers was magnetic, and by degrees other and more foolish thoughts crept into his head.

"What a pity!" he whispered, softly, scarcely knowing what he was saying, "what a pity that we two met so late—too late, Valeria!"

A flood of crimson rushed to Valeria's face. She half withdrew her hand from his, then left it there, while her eyes drooped lower beneath his gaze. Pardon him, dear reader. We all know that he was in the wrong, and that she was unpardonably weak. We all agree that they both ought to be stoned with stones; but still "accidents will happen;" and that moment's eloquent pause was instinct with danger and mischief. The clergyman bent lower, the little hand was pressed more closely, an arm stole softly round a slender waist, and, much as I grieve to write it of my heroine, the clerical lips were so near her own that a collision seemed inevitable. That kiss was never given, however; for at that very instant the study door was thrown sharply open, and starting asunder, with a thrill of horror, the foolish pair saw Isabel before them, with the Colonel leaning on her arm, and Rosina and the terrified and scandalized housekeeper in the background.

"There!" said Isabel, quietly, "I think the situation speaks for itself."

There was an instant's awful pause. Then the Colonel's face, which had been gray as ashes, flushed with a vivid crimson. He sprang forward to strike the young clergyman, but staggered as he made the step, and fell heavily into his arms, like a dead man. The young man laid him down upon the sofa; they gathered round him with awful faces; and in ten minutes the doctor, who had been hastily summoned from a neighboring square, confirmed their worst fears. It was a paralytic stroke, and the Colonel was liable to die at almost any moment. His days were numbered; and Valeria—poor, erring, foolish Valeria!—was the unhappy cause.

CHAPTER XXVII.

To say that Valeria watched beside that dying bed, by day and by night, is nothing. She watched there, with tears and prayers, and pleadings for forgiveness, that were pitiful to see. It almost seemed that, from their sincerity, they gained strength and power. For the dying man rallied at last, and saw the pale, haggard face bending over him that told him all. Loving her to the last with all his heart and soul, he knew how great would be her misery after he had gone, and managed, with his failing powers, to say a gentle word to her: "Poor Vallie! never mind!" That was all—the last words he uttered; and they pierced her heart with fresh agony and pain. But, after all, he had forgiven her, though she never, to her dying day, can forgive herself.

They bore her away from that final interview, feeble, and helpless, and ill. For weeks she never left her bed; and when she recovered, the grass was growing greenly over the heart that had loved her so!

From her home of affluence and splendor, Valeria returned to the Brompton shop, silent, sorrowful, and subdued. She claimed no rank, no advantage, no acquaintance, which her marriage had given her. She saw Isabel no more; and George Monair also passed from her memory almost as if he had never been. The death of Mrs. Moore, one year after that of the Colonel, broke the last link that bound her to the world of rank and fashion; and that world I need not tell you, troubled its head very little about her, when once her face was missed from its easily-filled ranks.

In the obscurity from which she had for so brief a time emerged, the young widow remained without a wish for change. She took her old place as eldest sister in the humble household without a murmur. She was the companion of her mother, the delight of her father, the faithful friend of her brothers and sisters, and the ornament of her home. In the process of time, John Grant gave up his business to a younger man. Maria, an energetic, helpful young lady of nineteen, married "Cousin John," to whom she had been engaged almost from her childhood; and the whole family removed to a pleasant farm in the country, not far from the homestead of the Bruces, where the colonel had wooed and won his bride.

There, changed by time, and most of all by sorrow, Malcom Bruce met his first and only love once more. He had been faithful to his early dream; he was faithful still. He wooed no longer the gay and giddy Valeria, to whom fidelity was but a name; but he won a grave and beautiful woman, whose heart had been so far softened by affliction, that it could feel for the loneliness of his own.

Valeria, then, is happy. She still dwells contentedly in her little Hampshire home; and Maria, with her husband and her children (whose name would almost seem to be legion), is her frequent and welcome guest. Her father and mother dwell very near her home; her brothers and sisters are all married and settled, yet not unmindful of the parent nest, or of those who shared it with them. The annual Christmas gathering in Mr. Grant's large farmhouse is, I can assure you, a sight well worth seeing.

And Isabel—and George—and Mrs. Monair? The elder lady died long ago, and I only wish I could tell you something good of the unhappy pair who resided with her, but I cannot. George Monair is still a "man about town," and next season you will see him lounging in the club windows, hanging about Tattersall's, or cantering down the Row, as idle, as useless, and as worthless a butterfly as was ever broken upon a wheel, while Isabel still reigns the queen of society, though younger women seek vainly to take away her scepter and her crown. No retribution has overtaken her as yet. She eats and drinks, and sleeps, and dresses well. She has but two troubles in her life—her hair is turning gray, and two wrinkles have made their appearance under her brilliant eyes. But the hair-dresser and the perfumer can, I suppose, settle that between them.

So she goes on, the idol and the lawgiver of the fashionable world, the cynosure of all eyes, the light, now and then, of some boy's enthusiastic dream. A bad wife, a false friend, a secret foe, a fickle mistress, a designing plotter, an intriguing politician, a successful, a fashionable, a graceful, a beautiful, and most emphatically a dangerous woman! With her, however, and her faults, her follies and her wickedness, we have no more to do.

THE END.

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